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THE WORLD'S LEADING

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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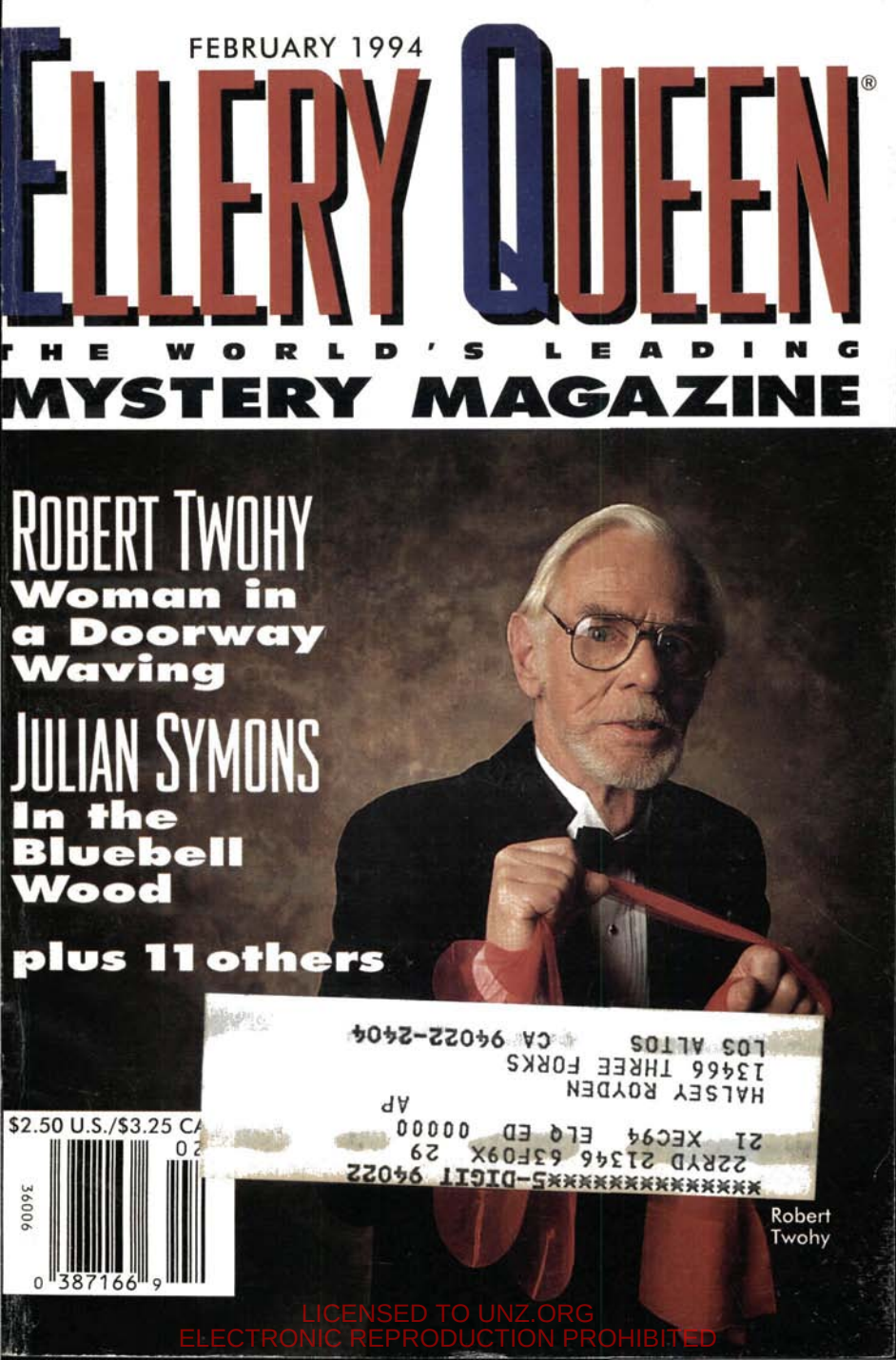
Woman in a Doorway Waving

JULIAN SYMONS
In the Bluebell Wood

plus 11 others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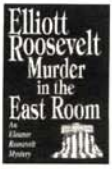

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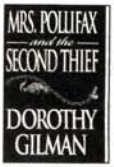

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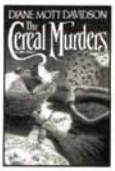

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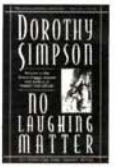

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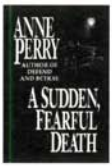

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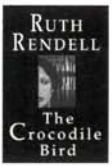

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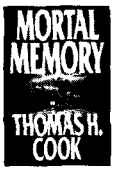

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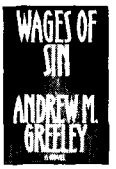

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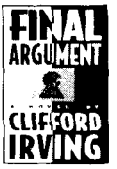

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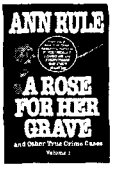

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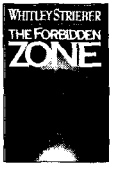

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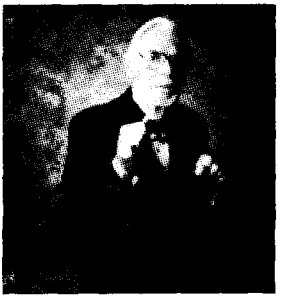

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a *NEW* short story by

JULIAN SYMONS

In Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers, *and in an earlier 1966 omnibus volume, Julian Symons had this to say about his reasons for writing crime fiction: "The thing that absorbs me most in our age is the violence behind respectable faces, the civil servant planning how to kill Jews most efficiently, the judge speaking with passion about the need for capital punishment, the quiet obedient boy who kills for fun. These are extreme cases, but if you want to show the violence that lives behind the bland faces most of us present to the world, what better vehicle can you have than the crime novel?" In his eighty-second year, Julian Symons continues to be one of the leaders and innovators in the crime field . . .*

IN THE BLUEBELL WOOD

by JULIAN SYMONS

Lance could not remember a time before he knew about King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the fact that he had been named for the most famous of them. The bluebell wood too had its place in this. It was his father who told him the stories, about the coming of Arthur, the beauty of Guinevere, and her love of Lancelot. At first the stories were from a big book called the *Morte D'Arthur*, but then they came from poems, poems called the *Idylls of the King* written by a man named Tennyson, which was his father's surname and, as he learned, his own.

In adolescence, thinking back, he remembered being in bed, fingers twitching the sheets, his father's face above him uttering passionately words he did not quite understand—*honour, chivalry*—and

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phrases that stayed in his mind even though he did not understand their meaning—"Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the king—else, wherefore born?" There was nothing in the poems about a bluebell wood, yet when he closed his eyes after the readings he quite distinctly saw himself, Lancelot, riding with Guinevere, dismounting at a stile, then walking hand in hand with her down a grassy path to the dimness of a wood carpeted with bluebells. . . . And when he opened his eyes the words flowed round him still:

> Many a bard, without offence,
> Has linked our names together in his lay,
> Lancelot, the flower of bravery, Guinevere
> The pearl of beauty

The face of the storyteller loomed large above him, eyes magnified by round spectacles. He knew the rough feel of army cloth on his bare arm, the smell of tobacco. His father was home on leave during the war. What was the war, why did his father wear a uniform and not armour, what did he do when he left home again, did he follow the king?

Nothing like that, his mother said. Anyway, she added laughing, if Lionel did follow the King he'd soon lose sight of him. "Your father's blind as a bat without his glasses. He does hush-hush work."

"What's hush-hush?"

"Secret. Work that keeps him away. Very important."

"For the King?"

"I suppose you could say that. For king and country."

They lived on the fringe of London, in an area that had missed almost all the wartime bombing. They had a little red brick house with a tiny front garden and one at the back that was a little bigger. The house next door was just the same, and the one next door to that, and so on down the road. "Only way to tell 'em apart is by numbers," his mother Esme said. "Know what we are?" she asked neighbours. "Rabbits in hutches, that's what."

"Good job we don't breed like 'em."

"You can take precautions."

They went off into fits of laughter. Esme was small, dark, quick moving. The neighbour, whose husband was fighting somewhere in Italy, was named Louise. They saw a lot of each other. When Lance came home from the school that was just three minutes' walk away, Louise would often be in the kitchen. Esme got his tea and they sat with him while he ate it, both smoking so that the room became

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blue with it, and talking incomprehensibly. He imagined Lancelot riding through those blue mists, freeing a fair maiden; then meeting Guinevere, they crossed the stile . . . Fragments of phrases came through to him.

". . . Dead and alive hole . . . see more life in a factory . . . you got a kid, you got a millstone around your neck . . ."

His father came home on weekend leave from the hush-hush job quite often and read from the *Idylls* about Gareth and Lynette, Merlin and Vivien, and what he loved most, Lancelot and Guinevere. Lying in bed, waiting for his father to come upstairs, he heard voices raised, his mother's sometimes almost a shriek.

It was when his father was at the hush-hush job that the visitor came. He was there when Lance came back from school, a tall smiling man who wore a much smarter uniform than his father's, and one with stars which the boy knew meant he was an officer, while his father had only the stripes of a sergeant. The officer's name was Pierre, and Esme said he belonged to the Free French. Pierre made pennies and a shilling come out of his ears, and gave them to Lance. Then Esme said she'd arranged for him to have tea and play with Tim Collins, who lived a few doors down the road. The arrangement was unusual, almost unknown.

"I don't want to." He began to cry.

Esme's temper was short. "You'll do as you're told. You're going out to tea, is that a reason to be a crybaby?"

"Look here." Pierre produced another shilling from his ear. "Why don't you and your friend Tim see what you can buy with this?"

When he was home again his mother said: "I was ashamed of you, crying just because you'd been asked out to tea." He made no reply. "Did you like Pierre?"

"Don't know."

"He's just a friend. Of Louise's really. No need to mention him to your father. Did you hear me?" He nodded. "Say yes when you're spoken to."

"Yes."

He said nothing to his father, even though he saw Pierre again more than once—just leaving as he came home from school, in the kitchen where he made jokes when they had tea together, once coming out of the bathroom wearing only shirt and pants. Did Lance understand what was happening? That was a question he never asked himself later on. At the time he was simply puzzled when Tim Collins, who never had been a friend of his, said his mother was

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having it off with a frog. Having what off? he wondered, and he had only seen pictures of frogs.

But although he said nothing, he did compare the round-shouldered goggle-eyed figure in a uniform that never seemed to fit properly with upright, trim, smiling Pierre, whose trousers had a crease of knife-edged sharpness, and who could make shillings come out of his ears. Then suddenly the war was over, there was a big party in their road with lots of food, including things he had never seen, like bananas, all set out on trestle tables, dancing and drinking. Pierre was seen no more; someone said he had gone back to France, and good riddance. Esme went around red-eyed, and shorter tempered than usual. And Lionel Tennyson, no longer Sergeant Tennyson, was demobbed, came home, went back to his work in the Ministry. Yes, he said to Lance, who was now in primary school, the war was really over.

"And we won. We beat the bad men like Sir Mordred, the good knights won." By this time Lance was reading the *Idylls* himself, knew some of the exciting bits by heart.

"The good knights won," his father echoed. They were in the bow-windowed living room. On the walls were reproductions of Victorian pictures, one showing the passing of Arthur, another Lancelot and Guinevere. He stood, in full armour, looking at his drawn sword, she knelt and gazed at him yearningly, her long fair hair around her face and falling to her waist, feet showing below the pure white of her robe. A silver-plated figure of King Arthur stood on the mahogany sideboard, drawing the magic sword Excalibur from its scabbard.

Yes, his father said, but it was not like King Arthur. "Bombs instead of swords nowadays. More's the pity."

"But the stories are all really true, aren't they?"

"Oh yes, yes, yes." His father became excited, as he had been reading aloud about Lancelot's deeds as an unknown knight at a tournament. "They are all true, and you must never forget them. That's why you were named Lancelot." He still read to his son sometimes at night, until Esme said the boy was too old for that now, it just encouraged him to be childish.

Afterwards Lance remembered these years of adolescence as an idyll in his own life. His father went to work each day to the Ministry and he went to school, got good reports, came back, did his homework, and then read a romantic story like *Kidnapped* or *Under the Red Robe*. Later, in bed, he read the *Idylls*. Afterwards he tried to

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remember something Esme had said that showed dissatisfaction with this life, which for her was one of keeping house and cooking, but could recall nothing. There were none of the arguments he had heard downstairs when he was a child, she was meticulous as ever in seeing that meals were cooked on time and in cleaning the house so that everything smelt of furniture polish.

Then one day she was gone. He came home one day to find tea on the table, bread and margarine, jam, scones she had made the previous day. He ate, washed up the things, settled down in the kitchen to his homework. When his father came home he said: "Mum's out." Mr. Tennyson nodded, went upstairs, came down again five minutes later looking paler than usual, eyes behind thick glasses vacant as those of a fish. He sat down at the kitchen table, put his head in his hands, and said to his son: "She's taken all her things, everything. Gone."

Lance was aware of his open mouth, closed it, said gone where? His father shook his head. "When will she be coming back?"

"She isn't. You remember a man coming round two or three weeks ago selling vacuum cleaners, or trying to?" Lance nodded. "She's gone off with him. With a vacuum cleaner salesman."

Lance put an arm round his father's shoulder. "We can manage. Until she comes back."

"She hates me, she says so in the letter. She'll never come back." He raised a face wet with tears.

Esme didn't come back. And Mr. Tennyson was quite incapable of managing. He burned meat and undercooked vegetables, and since these were days before frozen foods, they ate mostly out of tins. A woman who came in to do housework stole the few valuable things in the house, including the figure of King Arthur. Within a year, the house had been sold and they moved into a small flat in the same area, but in a main road with lorries rattling by day and night. It was cheaper, less trouble, a cleaner came in a couple of hours each week, there was nothing to steal. The Victorian prints of Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere remained, although they looked out of place in the tiny living room. There was no garden, and Mr. Tennyson loved gardening. One day Lance asked what the secret work was that his father had done in the war.

"Helping to decode German messages. I'm a statistician, you see, good at analysing sets of numbers and figures. I was one of a team. What we did was really quite important."

He sensed that this was delicate ground. "But no fighting?"

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"No fighting. I wouldn't have been much good at it. Like you, I can't see very well." And Lance, looking in the mirror, saw that his glasses were almost as thick as his father's, his face the same moon shape. So what was his father's job now at the Ministry, was it still important work?

"Not really. Mostly paperwork. Ordering materials for use in government contracts, then following them through, checking prices, keeping suppliers on their toes about delivery, making sure they don't overcharge. It's secure, you see, that's the great thing. When you're in the civil service you have a job for life. I'm not a doer, you know, but I love the stories, and I wanted you to love them too. And of course there's my name, that made me read the poems first of all. I was called Lionel, and Lionel Tennyson was a great cricketer, captain of England. But I'm a reader, not a doer. It was a kind of separate life for me."

A separate life, a secret life. Perhaps that conversation was the beginning for Lance of the secret life in which he was somebody different from the awkward teenager who looked uneasily at the world through round spectacles, was shy with girls and no good at games. In the secret life Judy, who burst into laughter when he asked if she would like to go with him to a rock concert, said wistfully that she thought Lancelot was a beautiful name, and wished she was called Guinevere and not dull Judy. "To me you will always be Guinevere," he said as she leaned towards him, opening her lips for the kiss.

The closest of Lance's few friends at school was Rod Williams, who told all sorts of tales about his father's adventures as a scrap dealer. "What's your father do?" Rod asked. "Office job, isn't it, pen pushing?"

"Not really. It's hush-hush work."

"But what's he *do?*"

"He's an agent."

"What, MI 5?"

"More secret. He's part of a very small group, they have to protect the queen. The other Royals too, but the queen especially. I think it's mostly the IRA they're worried about, but he doesn't tell me the details. I'm not supposed to talk about it. Swear you won't tell anyone."

Rod swore, but of course told his father. Later Lance showed Rod a newspaper photograph of an IRA bomb explosion in the Midlands and said one of the figures inspecting the wreckage was his father.

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"Thought you said he was protecting the queen. What's this got to do with her?"

Lance realized he had made a mistake. "That isn't all his group does. They've got other duties."

Rod was a large youth with small eyes and a pig's upturned nose. "My dad says you're making it all up. Just fairy stories, he says."

"Your dad doesn't *know*." But after that Lance gave up the stories about his father, who was becoming more and more absent-minded, withdrawn into what Lance supposed were secret thoughts. In the evening, after supper, he switched on the television and sat staring at it with no apparent awareness of what he was watching.

He received a few letters, but one morning a long envelope came, name and address typed. Mr. Tennyson examined the postmark, turned over the envelope, and looked at the back (Lance thought immediately of secret messages), slit it open, read the contents carefully, pushed aside his cereal, took off his glasses and wiped his eyes, spoke.

"Your mother. She's dead. A car accident. She was on her own. Apparently she'd been drinking."

Lance felt nothing. It seemed to him an age ago that they had lived in the red brick house with the front and back garden, that Pierre had made shillings come out of his ears, his father had come home on leave and read the *Idylls* to him. A curtain had been dropped in his mind, concealing that world as if it had never existed. Reality was here and now, the little flat where he lived, the school he would soon be leaving, and the secret world in which Judy/Guinevere entered the arms of Lancelot.

"I loved her, you know. In spite of everything, I loved her. We were never divorced and I always hoped she would come back. I know it was my fault." At that Lance was indignant. Esme had left her home and her child, how could it have been her husband's fault? Mr. Tennyson shook his head. "You don't understand, how could you? She was a kind of dream to me, and she didn't like dreamers." He gave his son what almost seemed a glare through the pebbled glasses. "What about you? You're leaving at the end of this term, what do you want to do?"

"I don't know. I don't want to go to a university. Something exciting."

His father's laugh was a rusty caw. "No money for a university, I can tell you that. Something exciting, that's stupid."

"What you used to read me, the *Idylls,* that was exciting."

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"That was reading, poetry. Very nice, but not real. Perhaps I shouldn't have—you must get started, that's the thing. I might be able to help." For a moment Lance had a vision of his own place in that imaginary world in which his father was an agent, but the next words dispelled it. "Customs and Excise."

"What?"

"A Customs officer, a good safe job. I'll make enquiries, might be able to pull some strings."

And the strings were pulled, so that Lance became a member of HM Customs and Excise. There was a training period in which he learned what to look out for, the sort of travellers likely to have watches loaded on both arms, the likely drug stuffers and swallowers, the foolish innocents who thought they could break the rules just this once and showed awareness of it in their faces and gestures.

It sounded exciting, and he imagined scenes in which the secret life became reality. There would be a woman traveller, not exactly beautiful but elegant, stylish, the kind of woman whose very appearance left him tongue-tied. She walked through the "Nothing to Declare" channel at the airport, cool and faintly disdainful. He asked her to open a case, and her raised eyebrows asked, *Can you really mean it?*, but were then replaced by a panic-stricken *I may just have forgotten* . . . And then the opened case revealed—what? Something forgivable, an undeclared item from St. Laurent, a small storehouse of scents, something on which she need not to be taken to court.

Afterwards she was grateful, asking his name, was enchanted to know it was Lancelot, suggested a meeting—but at that point fantasy was checked, for there were strict rules about such matters and he was not sure that he wanted to break them. In any case, the disdainful elegant ladies remained in his imagination. He encountered in his duties instead pathetic Africans or South Americans who carried drugs in stomach or anus, or petty villains who travelled a lot by air on genuine business, and fancied their chances of getting drugs or watches through Customs as a kind of perk. Being a Customs officer at an airport, as he said to his father, was as dull a job as any other.

A few months after Lance began to work, Mr. Tennyson took early retirement from the Ministry. Was the retirement purely voluntary, or had it been urged on him by his superiors? Either way, he showed unmistakable signs of a mental decline that was more than absent-mindedness. He would go out shopping, wander off to a nearby park, sit there for an hour or two, and return having forgotten to do the

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shopping. In the flat he let milk boil over on the stove, forgot to turn off a gas fire so that it burned all night, and almost caused a fire by leaving an electric iron on while watching television. At times he thought Esme was still alive and was coming back to live with them, so that he cleared a cupboard for her clothes and rearranged all the furniture. When Lance first got the Customs and Excise job he thought of looking for an apartment on his own, but it was borne in on him that this was not possible. He would have to look after his father, who although insisting that he was perfectly well (and seeming healthier than when he was at the Ministry) admitted to becoming absent-minded.

Mr. Tennyson's interest in the *Idylls* had lapsed after news of Esme's death, but it revived in retirement. He read biographies of Tennyson, and deluged Lance with quotations from the *Idylls,* most of them designed to dampen what he saw as his son's unhealthy yearning for excitement. Life, he said, was a great teacher, and he quoted: "A young man will be wiser by and by." Not only a great teacher, Life, but it cut you down to size. "The dirty nurse, Experience, in her kind hath foul'd me"—Lance should remember that this had happened to his father in the sad loss of his wife. After he had gained experience, he should look for a nice girl, and inevitably he quoted: "In the spring a young man's fancy—"

Brutality was not in Lance's nature, but he came near to it then. "And what would you do when I found a girl, live with us? My wife might have something to say about that."

Nothing like that, Mr. Tennyson said, adding with insufferable complacency: "No need to worry, I can look after myself." The obvious truth was that he couldn't.

But the problem didn't arise, because Elaine, the fair maid of Astolat who died for love of Lancelot, and Guinevere, whom he loved guiltily, remained as much figures of the secret world as the disdainful woman traveller. Lance found it hard to know what to say to girls. When he looked in the glass a moon face stared back at him with eyes owlish behind the round glasses and a head that wobbled so much on its thin neck that it seemed likely to fall off. What girl could fancy someone who looked like that?

On the other hand, it was true that Rod, who was certainly not handsome, pulled plenty of girls. He chatted them up when they stopped at the stall he had in the local market, where he sold all sorts of odds and ends including stuff bought by his father the scrap

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merchant. "Nothing to it," Rod said, little pig eyes twinkling. "Couple of drinks, bit of chat, and bang you're in."

That was all right perhaps for Rod, who had his own place, but Lance couldn't possibly have shocked his father by taking a girl back to their flat. Rod immediately said go back with him, Lance could have the bedroom, he wasn't fussy, he and his girl would manage on the sitting room sofa. Got to get your leg over sometime, Rod said, plenty of nookie about, no need to pay prossies for it. The sly sideways glance he gave when saying that was justified. Lance had been with prostitutes. Such encounters at least involved no chatting up, but although as Rod put it he got his leg over, these brief encounters were not satisfying. After them he felt ashamed, for they seemed a betrayal of the tall, fair, slender girl he met in the secret life, the girl to whom no words had to be spoken, no explanations made. They met, crossed the stile, walked hand in hand towards the darkness of the wood and the brightness of the bluebells that made a carpet within it, and then lay down together.

It was through Rod that the secret life and Lance's everyday world became one. Rod played for a pub darts team, and occasionally Lance went along to watch. Two girls were with Rod, one fair, one dark.

"Del, you know Lance," Rod said. "Gwyn, this is Lance I was telling you about, works in Customs. Want to watch out for him, he's a tiger, so they tell me." General laughter. "You should see him in his uniform, he's hot stuff."

"I can imagine," the dark girl said, not joking, as if she meant it.

Lance bought a round. The dark girl spoke to him. "Rod was on about you, said you were dead clever, only you don't talk much. Why's that?"

"Nothing to say, I expect."

"Doesn't stop me, Del, does it? You either." She laughed, showing regular teeth. "Who was it said 'I've got a big head, only there's nothing in it,' Princess Di was it? Anyway, that's me. But you, Lance, I bet you're deep. Is he deep, Rod?"

"Deep as the deep blue sea," Rod said. At this too there was laughter, and Lance did not feel it was directed at him. When the dark girl went on to ask what he was thinking about he said: "All right, I'll tell you. Your name, Gwyn. Why are you called that, what's it short for?"

"Nosy, aren't we? Okay, I don't mind telling, it's Gwyneth. Gwyneth Lewis, there's Welsh for you. What about Lance, what sort of name is that?"

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For once, strangely, he did not mind saying his name was Lancelot, even added that he thought Gwyn might have been short for Guinevere.

"That's King Arthur, I know about him, saw the film. She was Arthur's wife. But then she and Lancelot—" She looked at Lance, burst out laughing.

A couple of hours and more than a couple of drinks later, the darts match lost, Rod said to him at the bar: "You're well away there, boy, Gwyn fancies you."

"She does?" Rod closed one little eye. But it still seemed incredible to Lance, and in any case, where could he take Gwyn, who was dark instead of fair but still might really be Guinevere? He was not sure he had enough money for a hotel. But that turned out to be no problem at all. When they left the pub she took his arm and said: "My place, all right?"

What followed was shocking, exciting, and exhausting, quite unlike the brief encounters he had known. Just after midnight he remembered his father, said he must telephone.

"You what?"

"I must tell my father. He'll be worried."

She stared at him, and for a moment he thought she was going to tell him to get out, go home. Instead she put up a hand, stroked his cheek. "You're funny. Okay, there's the phone."

His father's voice was first indignant, then petulant. Did Lance know the time, surely he could have rung earlier, where was he, why couldn't he come home? At the end he said Lance was unkind and thoughtless, and put down the telephone without saying goodbye.

In the morning she made toast and coffee, then went back to bed. He asked if she was out of work.

"I'm on and off, and this week's off. I do jobs for a travel agency, escorting groups, mostly Spain and Portugal. Bloody hard work, don't let anyone tell you different. Next week I'm taking some old dears to Amsterdam, coach tour." She laughed. "Last time I mislaid one, turned out he'd gone to the casino, won a bagful of money, got beaten up, landed in hospital. They blamed me, wouldn't you know?"

When Lance had dressed, he didn't know what he should say. "Can I—" He began again. "I mean, I don't suppose you're free—"

"Thought you'd never ask. Free as air, Lance. Funny name, but I like it, reminds me of something, wonder what it can be?"

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"What—oh, I see." He blushed, and she laughed. She did not speak the language of Guinevere, and she was not like the woman who inhabited the secret world, but her face coalesced in the image of the fair-haired Guinevere who knelt at Lancelot's feet.

When he stood in the Customs hall and sat in the canteen, the Gwyn who walked beside him in the secret world, who crossed the stile and went down the path with him to the bluebell wood, was Gwyn who had been transformed into Guinevere.

Each evening after work he met her. Twice they went out with Rod and his Delia, but he liked it best when they were on their own. They saw a movie, went to a concert, ate in cheap restaurants, and talked—or for the most part Lance talked and she listened, for his diffidence had gone, he had become eloquent, talking of King Arthur and the *Idylls* and Lancelot's love for Guinevere. And they went to bed, about which she was more urgent than he. The physical act offered a kind of fulfillment of his worship of Guinevere, yet something about it seemed to him messy and coarse, unlike love in the secret world. There you kissed and fondled, but there was none of the sticky gluing of mouth to mouth, nor the moans and subdued shrieks that Gwyn uttered, sounds that had no place in a Tennysonian idyll.

After that first night they spent only evenings together. Mr. Tennyson grumbled about his late return to the flat, but accepted Lance's explanation about being short-handed and working extra hours, and one of his colleagues at work said he seemed almost human, instead of going through the motions like a robot. Only Gwyn showed dissatisfaction when he left her. "You don't want to stay, that it?" she asked. Lance said his father, an old man, couldn't be left alone to look after himself. She shook her head.

"You got to look after number one in this world. And have fun. Still, we do that, don't we?" He said yes, although the physical business was something he found increasingly a problem, and having fun was not an adequate description of the joy he had in the secret world which he could create even in the canteen or walking along the street—but most of all in bed alone at night when coarse-speaking Gwyn became sweet Guinevere. He was transported into that life even in her presence now, so that one evening she tapped his forehead and said: "Anyone home? Didn't hear, did you? I said next week I can't see you, taking these old dears to Amsterdam. Not that the red-light district there will do any of 'em much good." Her laugh was loud. "We'll be back Saturday though, I can see you

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Sunday. Thing is, are you on that weekend?" He said he was.

"I want you to stop me, check my bags." She went on quickly. "Tell you why. My boss is coming on the trip, nosy bastard, one of the other girls has got it in for me, told him I'm bringing in stuff I shouldn't, know what I mean? So my younger brother Billy, he wants a watch, I'm going to buy one out there, go through the 'Something to Declare' channel, pay the duty, okay?"

"Yes, but I don't see—"

"You look at the rest of my gear, check it, give it the okay, show the little fat bastard that's my boss where he gets off trying to climb into bed with me. Which is all he wants, I may say. I hate fat men, starving lean hungry ones are my meat." She giggled. "Just think what Sunday'll be like when I'm back, I'll have been good for a week."

He hardly missed her physical presence in the week while she was away. She existed in the secret world, transformed into the Guinevere of the *Idylls* by a chaste radiant glow that surrounded her. He imagined her watching him fighting in the tournament, telling him that she loved him even though she knew this love to be a betrayal, but the scene more persistent in his mind was that when they walked along the path to the bluebell wood, and there lay down together in a tree's green shade. It was the world he had so often read about made real, that world

> Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
> Nor ever wind blows loudly, but it lies
> Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard lawns
> And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea

Mr. Tennyson cheered up no end having his son home every evening, managed some shopping and cooking successfully, and said it was just like old times. The Chief Customs Officer at the airport, on the other hand, said Lance wanted to wake his ideas up, he looked like a tit in a trance, and it was true that as he stood with a couple of other officers, smart in their uniforms, he absented himself from the passengers who streamed past looking happy, eager, or anxious, pushing and wheeling bags and cases.

He was absent in the world of Lancelot, or only half present, when a voice said: "Got the receipt somewhere," and he was suddenly aware of Gwyn before him, Gwyn pushing a trolley that held a suitcase and a holdall. She wore a dark-blue raincoat and a jaunty blue hat with a red feather in it. Behind her a fellow Customs officer

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whose carrot-coloured hair had brought him the name Red, mouthed something silently and grinned. There was no sign of the little fat boss, who had perhaps gone through the "Nothing to Declare" channel with the rest of the party.

Lance looked at the watch she showed him in its case, and at the receipt, got a list to check the duty payable, tapped the case and holdall, and asked her to open them.

Gwyn looked at Red in mock despair, he shook his head sympathetically. She unlocked the case, zipped open the holdall, overdramatically gave him her handbag, stood back.

Lance's fingers moved lightly among jacket and skirts, underwear, powder, lipstick, scent. He replaced them, and was about to zip up the holdall when beneath his fingertips he felt the hint of an obstacle, nothing more than a rucked-up bit of lining perhaps, except that no lining should have existed there. He looked up to find Gwyn's large dark eyes staring into his own challengingly, expectantly. His fingers moved further, more carefully, over the holdall's surface, and he knew that obstacle was not a natural one.

There was then a moment of uncertainty for him, a moment when Gwyn's lips—could they ever have been Guinevere's?—curved in a confident smile. Then the smile was broken, the whole shape of her face seemed to change and splinter as he picked up her bags and said they would need to examine them more closely. She made for him, claws out and spitting words never used by Guinevere, and Red had to help him restrain her.

The velour-lined false pocket in the holdall contained uncut diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires. As Red said wonderingly, it was hard to see why the silly bitch played it the way she did, calling attention to herself over the watch. If she'd gone through the "Nothing to Declare" channel she'd have had a chance of getting through, though they always took a hard look at couriers in charge of groups. As it was, Gwyneth Lewis was duly charged, and released on bail.

"You're silent tonight," Mr. Tennyson said. "Something on your mind?"

"Betrayal."

"What's that? Something from the *Idylls?*"

"Not from the *Idylls*. I'm going out."

He wandered aimlessly about the streets, found himself outside the pub where he met Gwyn, went in. Rod was at the bar, a glass raised. Beer sprayed from his mouth when he saw Lance. "You got

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a nerve," he said, "coming in here, showing your face."

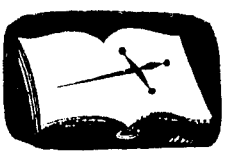
"I don't understand."

"Gwyn gave it to you straight enough, didn't she? Asked you to check her stuff, what you think she did that for? So you could shop her? All you had to do was charge duty on the watch, pass her through, there was a century in it for you. Woulda been more next time. Whatsa matter, more stupid than you look, are you?" Rod's snout was very close to Lance. "You landed everybody in it, me included for making the intro. And you should look out, she's Corney Barrow's girl."

Corney Barrow was well known locally, a villain reputed to have a hand in everything from acting as a fence to selling dope. "You mean—"

"I said I made the intro, Corney wanted an in at the airport, I said you could be useful getting stuff through. Now you dropped his girl in it. You want to watch yourself, mate. I were you, I'd move out of the area for a while." Lance said that was not possible because of his father. "Suit yourself," Rod said, and turned away.

So he had been betrayed by Gwyn, and betrayed her in his turn, because he had been forced to realise she was Gwyneth Lewis and not Guinevere. But as he went from one pub to another, drinking whisky, to which he was unused, the image of Gwyn faded and was replaced wholly by that of Guinevere, looking as in the picture so lovingly, so yearningly, at Lancelot. The lustre of her fair hair was with him as he left the last pub, and three of them came out after him. He saw light flash and steel, heard only faintly the voice say something about a present from Corney. There was a pain in his side, a dull but deepening pain, and he felt himself truly Sir Lancelot, suffering as "a spear prick'd sharply his own cuirass, and the head pierc'd thro' his side, and there snapt, and remain'd." Lancelot then cried out her name: "Guinevere," he cried, "the flower of all the west and all the world." He hardly felt what seemed the hoofbeats trampling and kicking him, and in his last moments was aware only that Guinevere had taken his hand and was leading him down to the peace of the bluebell wood where they would rest forever.



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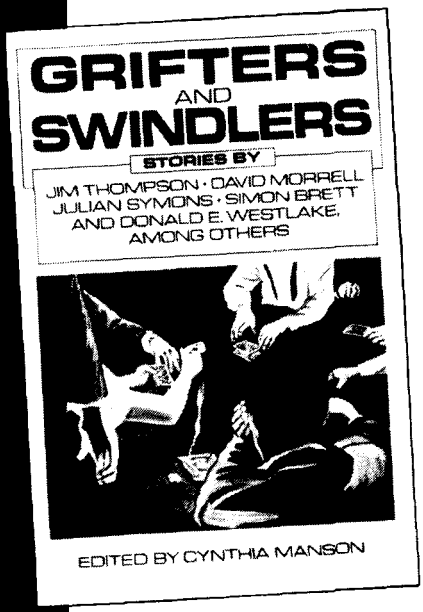
GRIFTERS AND SWINDLERS

Edited by Cynthia Manson



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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES POWELL

Canadian author James Powell has lived in the United States for a good many years—so long that in writing this story he went through several drafts before realizing that some years ago the Canadian dollar bill was replaced by a dollar coin. We had the pleasure of meeting the author in his hometown of Toronto last year on the occasion of the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention. To us, and to his many fans, he seemed very much at home in his native land . . .

A BEQUEST FOR MR. NUGENT

by JAMES POWELL

"Ever notice how starlings look like well-salted oil slicks?" asked Paul Nugent, who stood with the Toronto skyline behind him, looking down on the terrace of the apartment below.

Old Mrs. Bowles was in her wheelchair at the coffee table. She found the description apt and might have answered, "And so do you, my fine feathered friend," for despite a mild case of dandruff, Nugent preferred dark suits of a glossy sort, gaberdine it would have been in her day, a material she suspected was no longer in fashion. Instead she went back to leafing through the books her mysterious visitor had brought her from the library.

He could certainly amuse. She smiled to herself, remembering his recent remark about Thea Gable. He'd said, "With her cheekbones and bobbed hair Thea could be one of those singers the French call a 'diseuse,' " adding, "That is, if she had anything to say."

"Do you think her stupid then?" asked Mrs. Bowles hopefully.

He only shrugged. "Stupidity's not a crime."

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And that, Mrs. Bowles knew to her regret, was Nugent's way. Just when she was ready to join him in a real cut-up job he would sheath his knife, leaving the impression of sharper things unsaid. Another tantalizing reason the visits of this man, this total stranger, had become the high points of her weeks.

Yes, Nugent was the perfect visitor, reporting wittily on the world outside, resetting the clocks before spring forward and fall back and after power outages, bringing a pot of crocuses for the April window sill or a box of pastry—until he learned they were against her doctor's orders. Now, since his uncle passed away, Nugent's little presents had become slightly more expensive, like the nice copy of *The Warden* which, with a naughty twinkle, he described as "a well-bound Trollope." Most of all, he tolerated Mrs. Bowles's moods and her willfulness, laughing good-naturedly when she cheated at cribbage and again when she absolved herself by claiming larcenous blood on her Grant side.

And increasingly, Mrs. Bowles spent the time when Nugent wasn't there wondering why he came. At first she'd kept a sharp eye out for something missing, a silver picture frame or one of her prized enameled boxes. But he took nothing, which only deepened the mystery.

Mrs. Bowles was a suspicious person by nature and by circumstance. For most of her seventy-five years she had believed that people were more interested in her money than they were in her. In this she thought they were foolishly mistaken, for she had a rather high opinion of herself. So she honed a sharp tongue sharper and came to enjoy the role of the scorpion at the honey pot. You approached her at your peril.

"As for Thea," she'd added, not wanting to let the subject die, "only a ninny would have brought you to meet me. I'm much more interesting."

"Thea's a true friend," Nugent insisted. "You're lucky to have her. She was worried you were turning into a recluse. And, if you remember, you weren't exactly doing wheelies that first time she brought me by. There you were, half-tipsy, sitting in the dark and feeling sorry for yourself."

"Half-tipsy?" laughed Mrs. Bowles. "What an old-fashioned young man you are. I was drunk as a skunk."

Nugent smiled as some men in their late thirties do when people call them young. Then he said, "And you could cut the cigarette smoke in here with a shovel."

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Mrs. Bowles looked over at her pack of cigarettes longingly. If she wouldn't give up smoking entirely, Nugent had insisted she abstain during his visits. Since it was the only thing he'd ever asked of her she had agreed.

"Thea saw you needed a good shake," Nugent continued. "She just didn't know how. That's why she asked me along."

"Helplessness is just another crutch for ninnies like her," said Mrs. Bowles. "She only brought you around to show you off. But now you're coming to visit me."

Mrs. Bowles had spoken these last words with satisfaction. But now they reminded her of her grandmother's stories of gentlemen scoundrels who prowled the water places and resorts back in the old country making themselves useful to elderly women and who, when the time came, always had some sad story to tell. Bequest hunters, her grandmother had called them.

Well, Mrs. Bowles had made it clear from the outset that Nugent could expect nothing of that sort from her. Not that she couldn't have been generous had she chose. She was quite well off and had no one to leave her money to, having disinherited her nephew Charles some years before. Charles was a computer-head or whatever you call people whose lives revolved around gigabytes, ROM, RAM, and such, always in a rush to get in on this or that electronic ground floor and forever pestering her to back him in some venture.

But the question still remained: If Nugent wasn't interested in her money, why did he come? Once when she asked him outright he'd said, "Why not? Isn't visiting the sick a corporal work of mercy or whatever they call it?"

"So is visiting the imprisoned," she answered pointedly. Oh, how he'd laughed at that before turning grave and insisting, "I'm here because I enjoy coming. If you'd rather I didn't, just say so and I won't bother you anymore."

Well, one day Mrs. Bowles had tried that. Frustrated by the enigma she'd turned this man into, she announced she never wanted to see him again. The next three weeks had been the loneliest of her life. Not the boredom her friends passed off as loneliness. Hers was the real thing, the ache to see another human being. And she'd suddenly found herself wishing Nugent was her nephew, not the electronically spendthrift Charles. But suppose, caution warned her in the next moment, this was just what Nugent meant her to feel? As humiliating as it was to think he was only after her money, in

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her heart she feared it was true. You are a foolish old woman, Mrs. Bowles, she told herself.

To lay her suspicions to rest once and for all, she decided to reinstate her nephew Charles as her sole heir. This was something she would probably have done anyway. Family had always been important with the Grants. She would never have cut him off if he hadn't married a woman she thoroughly disapproved of. "If legs were brains, that woman would be Albert Einstein," she told Charles at their last meeting, adding loudly, as he stormed from the room to escape her famous tongue, "If brains were legs, she'd be Toulouse-Lautrec."

Mrs. Bowles waited until she'd settled everything with her lawyer. When she telephoned Nugent to ask him to come back she made it a point to tell him what she'd done. "Good," he'd said approvingly. But when she hung up, she rather thought she'd seen the last of the man. However, he resumed his visits and, in fact, seemed more relaxed than before.

Until just now. As Nugent stood at the window, staring out across the city, deep in his own thoughts, Mrs. Bowles saw his face darken as though something evil had cast a shadow there. Feeling her eyes, he turned away. A moment later Nugent made his observation about starlings, speaking in so casual a voice that Mrs. Bowles decided what she'd seen had only been a trick of the light.

After a while she said, "When you started visiting I had this idea you were the brains of a gang of robbers with designs on the bank across the street. Did I ever tell you that?" She laughed at herself.

Smiling, Nugent returned to his drink on the coffee table. "An art thief, yes," he said, looking reproachfully at the spot on the wall where the Cornelius Krieghoff had hung before Mrs. Bowles put it in storage. "A contract killer, yes. But no, you never told me the bank robber one. A bank heist worth three years' planning?"

"Three years?" exclaimed Mrs. Bowles. "Have you really been coming that long?"

Nugent toasted the fact with his near-empty glass.

"The contract killer business was a tad paranoid," conceded Mrs. Bowles. "Afterall, I may not have many friends but who would pay money to have me killed?"

Nugent said nothing.

"My nephew?" asked Mrs. Bowles.

Nugent shrugged.

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"Ah, but you're forgetting that Charles doesn't know I've written him back into my will. If he did, he'd come fawning around and I'd get so sick of it I'd cut him out again. No, let him find out after I'm dead." Mrs. Bowles gave Nugent a cool look. "Blood remains thicker than pussycats."

The pussycat reference came from a cruel little game she'd made Nugent play in the early days of his visits. The object was to invent outlandish projects for her to leave her money to. Among Nugent's suggestions was the SPPMCR, the Society for the Promotion of Pari-Mutuel Cat Racing, dedicated to training strays and alley cats to chase catnip mice around a greyhound track. Mrs. Bowles laughed until she had to lay a hand on her breast. "Love it. Love it," she said. Then, because she wasn't a cat fancier, she'd added, "No, blood is thicker than pussycats."

Then it was her turn. "I'll endow an order of monks," Mrs. Bowles told him. "Its mission on earth will be to visit and care for women over seventy of the widowed or spinster sort. To this end the monks should have paramedical and paralegal training, be handy enough to repair small appliances, and have sufficient knowledge of politics and popular literature to engage in polite conversation. They will be called the Order of Saint Nugent and whatever reward they receive will not be in this life but in Heaven." Surprisingly, he had endured such talk.

Nugent finished his drink. In a moment, she knew, he would slap his knees in preparation for standing up. Then he would say, "Well . . . ," take a look around the room to see if he'd left anything undone, repeat any errands she had given him, and leave until the next time.

The phone rang. Mrs. Bowles picked up the receiver. Nugent rose politely and went to admire an old military print on the far wall. When Mrs. Bowles hung up the phone she frowned and asked, "Remember Mr. Austin?"

"Your private detective? How could I forget? I spent an entire week pretending he wasn't following me."

The year before, she had employed Mr. Austin to do a background check on Nugent. But all he could report was that her visitor worked for the province in some dreary corner of the Department of Education, that he was married to a very attractive woman named Roxanne on whom he doted, but whose lifestyle put pressure on the family budget. However, he was expected to inherit a considerable

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estate on the death of his uncle. Most of this Mrs. Bowles already knew from Nugent himself.

"Mr. Austin is in the neighborhood and wants to drop by," said Mrs. Bowles. "It's something about you. Would you like to stay for another drink?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

As she busied herself with the ice and whiskey at her side, Mrs. Bowles found herself wondering about Mrs. Nugent. Nugent seldom mentioned her because, Mrs. Bowles had always assumed, he had the good sense not to spend his time with one woman talking about another. Lately he hadn't mentioned her at all. "How's Roxanne, by the way?" she asked.

Nugent's expression faltered. (Now there was a first, Mrs. Bowles told herself.) "I don't really know," he said. "We've separated."

Mrs. Bowles waited, half expecting a sad story of the bequest-hunter sort. But Nugent had no more to say.

In a few minutes Floyd Austin arrived, a windy, corpulent man with a plantigrade walk and a shapeless suit. He seemed surprised when Nugent let him in.

"Let's just pretend you two have met," said Mrs. Bowles, gesturing Austin to a chair. "Since you're here on your own time let me offer you a drink, Mr. Austin. Rye and water?"

"Sure," said the private detective, nodding her through the drink's proportions. Then he leaned back with the glass and lit a cigarette. Mrs. Bowles expected Nugent to object. But apparently he didn't care whether Austin smoked or not.

"We kind of left the file open on Mr. Nugent here," said Austin, tossing the spent match into the ashtray.

"I recall saying I'd pay for results," said Mrs. Bowles. "The answer to the riddle of my mysterious visitor." She looked over at Nugent, who seemed amused.

"And I recall five thousand dollars," specified Austin. He waited for her confirming nod before continuing. "Anyway, a businessman like myself runs a kind of trap line, people he checks in on regularly because they can do him a favor or, like Mr. Nugent here, put some money in his pocket. Now right after his uncle died something real funny happened: Mrs. Nugent packed up and moved out. Crazy, right, to stick around for the hard times and split when the going got good? It gets a businessman like myself to thinking, eh? So this morning, finding myself at the courthouse on another matter, I asked my friend there if I couldn't take a peek at the will in question.

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Well, it turns out all Mr. Nugent here got from his uncle was the cheap goodbye, a crisp two-dollar bill just to show he hadn't been forgotten."

"I never said I inherited anything from my uncle," insisted Nugent.

Austin directed his words to Mrs. Bowles. "Want a real kick in the slats?" he asked. "Guess who *did* do the inheriting?"

"I'd rather you told me, Mr. Austin," she said drily.

"How about a certain Charlie Grant?"

"My nephew?" Mrs. Bowles turned to Nugent. "What does this mean?" she demanded.

Nugent wasn't smiling anymore. He avoided her eyes.

"Hey, I was getting pretty damn curious myself," admitted Austin. "And from what I'd seen of Mrs. Nugent I figured she might just be the one to clue me in. If I made it worth her while, that is. After all, it didn't look like anybody'd broken the law. A man can leave his money to whoever, right?

"I only had one little problem: how to get in touch with her. Now, I knew she belonged to a health spa over on Bayview. That's where I lucked out in more ways than one. Places like that aren't much for giving out members' phone numbers. But not long after she walked out on hubby here, Mrs. Nugent got in a little spat at the spa. Not your cat fight stuff, you know, hair-pulling and scratching. No, sir, she decked Mrs. Charlie Grant with a good right cross and henceforth was a persona non what-do-you-call-it on the premises. They were happy to give out her new number.

"When I spoke to her just now she said she'd be real happy to fill me in," said Austin. "For half my fee." He grinned at Nugent. "She said she wanted to spiff up her wardrobe and get back into circulation. I'm on my way to see her. I just wanted to make sure we had a deal about the money."

"Five thousand dollars for results," said Mrs. Bowles.

"Wouldn't you rather hear it from me?" asked Nugent. "Why make Mr. Austin here share his fee?"

Mrs. Bowles gave Nugent a careful look. "All right," she agreed. "If that's the way you want it."

"Hey, we're all ears," said Austin. With a big smile he made a show of getting comfortable.

Mrs. Bowles tucked in her chin and stared down at the ice cubes in her glass, wondering why she was dreading this moment she had waited for so long. When Nugent was slow in starting she looked

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up. He led her eyes over to Austin. Mrs. Bowles understood. "I won't keep you any longer, Mr. Austin," she said. "I'll send your check in due course. Please see yourself out."

Austin scowled with surprise. Then he shrugged as if he didn't give a damn. Rising and finishing his drink at the same time, he lumbered from the apartment.

When the door closed Mrs. Bowles said, "Well?"

Nugent began awkwardly. "When I was a kid my mother would cart me along every Sunday afternoon to visit my uncle. While I watched, they would sit across from each other at a card table. My mother always brought along this old plush chocolate box from which she'd take a good handful of loose photographs of the posed and snapshot variety, gather them into a deck, and deal them out like a fortuneteller, five at a time and face up. Taking each photo in turn, my uncle would venture identification of persons and places. If she agreed, my mother would write the information on the backs and deal out another five. She insisted that she and my uncle, being the only family I had, were obliged to provide me with a properly labeled photo album of Nugent kith and kin. My uncle indulged her even though he knew, as I did later on, that the real object of the exercise was to remind him that after her I was his only living relative."

"Could we get to the point a little faster?" asked Mrs. Bowles.

Taking a moment to edit his thoughts, Nugent said, "My uncle had made his money from inventions of the electrical sort and he had an inventor's approach to things. He'd stare at them until he'd hunted up a way to make them better. As I was growing up he stared at me quite a lot. But never quite got me to his liking. This was too bad because I rather admired him. His imagination was of the practical sort, which mine is not. And I was proud that we were family.

"Well, not long after I married, my mother passed away. Over the next few years, my uncle's dissatisfaction with me grew. Nor was it improved by his first heart attack. If I looked around the room when I came for a visit, I was taking inventory. If I asked about his health, I was on a death watch. And if I stayed away, I was an ungrateful young man. Of course his resentment was less against me than against dying. But to make a long story short, after a particularly unpleasant visit I received word through my uncle's lawyer that I was no longer welcome in his house and should expect nothing in his will, or some other Victorian turn of phrase.

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"My wife had been living for the day I would inherit my uncle's money. All I could do was reassure her that the old gentleman would come around sooner or later. Blood was thicker than water, after all. And so we waited. Then came his second heart attack.

"Now as it happened, my wife had made this friend at her spa, a woman with very much the same problem as ours. Her husband—your nephew—was worried that you'd die before he was written back into your will. It was our wives who dreamed up the plan. There I was, the nephew you should have had. And there Charles was, the perfect nephew for my uncle. So I filled Charles in on Uncle, his likes and dislikes, his quirks and points of view. And he filled me in on you.

"Charles started off like gangbusters, arriving with a bouquet of flowers on the pretext of visiting the previous occupant of my uncle's hospital room. His electronics were right down the old guy's alley. Charles came back for another visit. After my uncle was discharged he invited Charles around to see his workshop.

"My meeting your friend Thea took a bit more time. Charles said she was the kind who can't open a door without dropping something. He should have told me she wasn't one for shopping. Anyway, there I was one day to help her pick things up. A bag of oranges, I think it was. And here we are."

"Well, maybe Charles succeeded in getting his hands on your uncle's money," said Mrs. Bowles. "But you would never have gotten your hands on mine. I can assure you of that."

"Blood is thicker than water, right?" said Nugent.

"Exactly."

Nugent turned away wearily. "Maybe I'm not explaining it right. You see, I never wanted your money. I wanted you to write your nephew back into your will. That's why I came." He looked back at her. "And that's just what you did."

Mrs. Bowles felt herself blink several times.

"Oh, it wasn't all that hard," said Nugent. "You see, I could always look you straight in the eye and tell you the God's truth, that I wasn't after your money. But you never quite believed me. As much as you wanted to. I was counting on that."

They sat there, sharing the silence for a moment. Then Mrs. Bowles insisted, "But after I did it, after I put Charles back in my will, you still kept coming."

"That's what we'd agreed to do. People can change their minds. And their wills. We didn't want that to happen."

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Nugent shook his head. "I guess my big mistake was getting you to come around so quickly. When I told Charles the good news he saw a chance to get my money, too, and turned the charm on my uncle."

"The Grants have larceny in the blood," said Mrs. Bowles. "You can't say I didn't warn you." Then she pressed him, insisting again. "But even after your uncle died and you found out what Charles had done . . ."

". . . I kept up the visits?" said Nugent, finishing her sentence. "Look, if you want me to say I like you, all right, I do. You're not a bad old girl. I'll bet you'd really have been something if you'd ever made the effort. But . . ."

"But the fact is that wasn't why you kept coming."

"No," he admitted. "It was Charles. Oh, I never even minded the money that much. Or Roxanne. But, you see, I still think my uncle would have come around and we'd have been friends again before he died. I'll never forgive Charles for whatever it was he said to turn my uncle against me. I guess I'm not the murdering type. These visits have been the closest I could come. A modest revenge at best. I swore that if you died it wouldn't be out of neglect or loneliness. Yes, I swore I'd make Charles wait for your part of his money. So there you are." He raised his glass and toasted her with the end of his drink. "May you live forever, Mrs. Bowles."

Then he slapped his knees and glanced around the room for the last time. Mrs. Bowles saw the ghost of a smile when he came to the Krieghoff's place on the wall and knew he was telling himself it would soon be hanging there again. Her mystery man was now an open book. A bit pathetic, really. Much as she would be without her money.

She wanted to say something final. Instead she said, "I'm sorry I wasn't there when Roxanne decked Charles's wife."

"Me, too," said Nugent wistfully and started to rise.

"I suppose there's no chance of you two getting back together again?" she wondered.

Nugent grimaced. "I figured my uncle's money was part of my charm. Not all of it."

Mrs. Bowles brightened. "Why, then, we've got our work cut out for us, haven't we?" When he didn't seem to understand, Mrs. Bowles explained, "We must find Mr. Nugent a new wife. Oh, it won't be easy. You're too old-fashioned by half. For starters we must do something about your suits. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. We've

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both had too much to drink. This calls for clear thinking. Come back tomorrow. We'll map out a plan of battle. And when you've lined up a few candidates, you'll trot them by here for my inspection. Oh, you'll need my help, all right. You don't understand women." When Nugent protested, she conceded, "Well, maybe a bit."

"I intend to be harder to please this time around," he warned her. "No rushing into things."

"Good," she said. "I hope so. I mean to leave you well married. No matter how long it takes. That will be old Mrs. Bowles's one bequest for Mr. Nugent."

ON OUR COVER

If the best job for a writer is one which gives interesting glimpses into other people's lives, then Robert Twohy has chosen his occupations well. Since 1983, he has worked on-and-off with the Family Service Agency in Burlingame, California, tutoring immigrants in English and learning, he says, "about their various countries and former lives, customs, joys, and fears." Before joining the Family Service Agency, Mr. Twohy's tutorial work took him to the San Mateo county jails where he helped inmates awaiting trial for heavy crimes prepare for their high school equivalency diplomas—an experience he believes has given a base of reality to his crime stories.

Crime fiction, however, was not Robert Twohy's first love. Although his own first publication was a 1957 *EQMM* Department of First Stories feature, he got interested in the crime field by happenstance when he picked up the Dashiell Hammett novel *Blood Money,* a book he still considers to be Hammett's best.

Since 1957, Mr. Twohy has sold eighty-plus stories to *EQMM* and *AHMM,* while also writing comedy plays and movie scripts. He lives in his native San Francisco and hopes to become a full-time writer soon, spinning more tales for his "favorite mag," *EQMM.*

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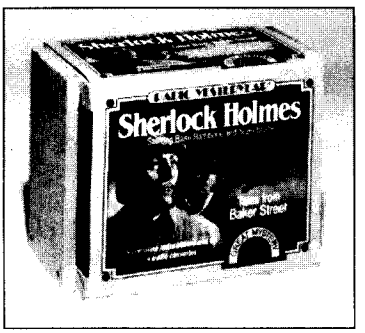

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a *NEW* Gordianus story by

STEVEN SAYLOR

Like most P.I. sleuths, Steven Saylor's Roman private detective Gordianus the Finder seems continually to be in need of a remunerative case. The present tale recounts one of his early adventures in the streets of Alexandria, where an empty purse leads him to brave a furious mob . . .

THE ALEXANDRIAN CAT

by STEVEN SAYLOR

We were sitting in the sunshine in the atrium of Lucius Claudius's house, discussing the latest gossip from the Forum, when a terrible yowling pierced the air.

Lucius gave a start at the noise and opened his eyes wide. The caterwauling terminated in a feline shriek, followed by a scraping, scrambling noise and then the appearance of a gigantic yellow cat racing across the roof above us. The red tiles offered little traction to the creature's claws and it skittered so close to the edge that for a moment I thought it might fall right into Lucius's lap. Lucius seemed to think so as well. He scrambled up from his chair, knocking it over as he frantically retreated to the far side of the fish pond.

The big cat was quickly followed by a smaller one, which was solid black. The little creature must have had a particularly aggressive disposition to have given chase to a rival so much larger than itself, but its careless ferocity proved to be its downfall—literally, for while its opponent managed to traverse the roof without a misstep, the black cat careered so recklessly across the tiles that at a critical turning it lost its balance. After an ear-rending cacophony of feral screeching and claws scraping madly against tiles, the black cat came plummeting feet-first into the atrium.

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Lucius screamed like a child, then cursed like a man. The young slave who had been filling our wine cups came running as fast as he could.

"Accursed creature!" cried Lucius. "Get it away from me! Get it out of here!"

The slave was joined at once by others, who surrounded the beast. There was a standoff as the black cat flattened its ears and growled while the slaves held back, wary of its fangs and claws.

Regaining his dignity, Lucius caught his breath and straightened his tunic. He snapped his fingers and pointed at the overturned chair. One of the slaves righted it, whereupon Lucius stepped onto it. No doubt he thought to put as much distance between himself and the cat as possible, but instead he made a terrible error, for by raising himself so high he became the tallest object in the atrium.

Without warning, the cat gave a sudden leap. It broke through the cordon of slaves, bounded onto the seat of Lucius's chair, ran vertically up the length of his body, scrambled over his face onto the top of his head, then pounced onto the roof and disappeared. For a long moment Lucius stood gaping.

At last, assisted by his slaves (many of whom seemed about to burst out laughing), Lucius managed to step shakily from the chair. As he sat, a fresh cup of wine was put in his hand and he raised it to his lips with an unsteady hand. He drained the cup and handed it back to the slave. "Well!" he said. "Go on now, all of you. The excitement's over." As the slaves departed from the atrium, I saw that Lucius was blushing, no doubt from the embarrassment of having so thoroughly lost his composure, not to mention having been got the better of by a wild beast in his own home, and in front of his slaves. The look on his chubby, florid face was so comic that I had to bite my lips to keep from smiling.

"Cats!" he said at last. "Accursed creatures! When I was a boy, you hardly saw them at all in Rome. Now they've taken over the city! Thousands of them everywhere, wandering about at will, squabbling and mating as they please, and no one able to stop them. At least one still doesn't see them much in the countryside; farmers run them off because they frighten the other animals so badly. Weird, fierce little monsters! I think they come from Hades."

"Actually, I believe they came to Rome by way of Alexandria," I said quietly.

"Oh?"

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"Yes. Sailors first brought them over from Egypt, or so I've heard. Seafarers like cats because they eat the vermin on their ships."

"What a choice—rats and mice, or one of those fearsome beasts with its claws and fangs! And you, Gordianus—all this time you've sat there as if nothing were happening! Oh, but I forget, you're used to cats. You and your Egyptian concubine have a cat which you keep as a kind of pet, don't you? As if the creature were a dog!" He made a face. "What do you call the thing?"

"Bethesda has always given her cats the name of Bast. It's what the Egyptians call their cat-god."

"What a peculiar people, to worship animals as if they were gods. No wonder we've practically taken over their government. A people who worship cats can hardly be fit to rule themselves."

I kept silent at this bit of conventional wisdom. My friend Lucius Claudius has a sweet nature and a kind heart, but he is a Roman patrician after all, and he often subscribes to the values of his class without question. I might have pointed out that the cat-worshipers he so offhandedly disdained had managed to create a culture of exquisite subtlety and monumental achievements while Romulus and Remus were still suckling a she-wolf, but the day was too hot to engage in historical debate.

"If the creature comes back, I shall have it killed," Lucius muttered under his breath, nervously eyeing the roof.

"In Egypt," I said, "such an act would be considered murder, punishable by death."

Lucius looked at me askance. "Surely you exaggerate! I realize that the Egyptians worship all sorts of birds and beasts, but it doesn't prevent them from stealing their eggs or eating their flesh. Is the slaughter of a cow considered murder?"

"Perhaps not, but the slaying of a cat most certainly is. In fact, when I was a young man in Alexandria, one of my earliest investigations involved the murder of a cat."

"Oh, Gordianus, you must be joking! You're not saying that you were actually hired to track down the killer of a cat, are you?"

"It was a bit more complicated than that."

Lucius smiled for the first time since we had been interrupted by the squabbling cats. "Come, Gordianus, don't tease me," he said, clapping his hands for the slave to bring more wine. "You must tell me the story."

I was glad to see him regain his good spirits. "Very well," I said. "I shall tell you the tale of the Alexandrian cat."

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* * *

The precinct called Rhakotis is generally acknowledged to be the most ancient part of Alexandria, the place where the city took root and about which it grew into a great metropolis. The principle landmark of Rhakotis is the Temple of Serapis, a magnificent marble edifice constructed on a huge scale and decorated with fabulous conceits of alabaster, gold, and ivory. Romans who have seen the temple begrudgingly admit that for sheer splendor it might (mind you, *might*) rival our own austere Temple of Jupiter—a telling comment on Roman provincialism rather than on the respective architectural merits of the two temples. If I were a god, I know in which house I would choose to live.

The temple is an oasis of light and splendor surrounded by a mazelike wilderness of winding streets. The houses in Rhakotis, made of hardened earth, are built high and jammed close together. The streets are narrow and strung with ropes upon which the inhabitants hang laundry and fish and plucked fowl to dry. The air is generally still and hot, but occasionally a sea breeze will manage to cross the Island of Pharos and the great harbor and the high city wall to stir the tall palm trees which grow in the little squares and gardens of Rhakotis.

In Rhakotis, one can almost imagine that the Greek conquest never occurred. The city may be named for Alexander and ruled by a Ptolemy, but the people of the ancient district are distinctly Egyptian, darkly complected with dark eyes and the type of features one sees on the old statues of the Pharaohs. These people are different from us, and so are their gods, which are not the Greek and Roman gods of perfect human form but strange hybrids of animals and men, frightful to look at.

One sees many cats in Rhakotis. They wander about as they wish, undisturbed, sunning themselves in patches of light, chasing grasshoppers, dozing on ledges and rooftops, staring at the inaccessible fish and fowl hung, with the laundry, beyond their reach. But the cats of Rhakotis do not go hungry; far from it. People set bowls of food out on the street for them, muttering incantations as they do so, and not even a starving beggar would consider taking such consecrated food for himself—for the cats of Rhakotis, like all cats throughout Egypt, are considered to be gods. Men bow as they pass them in the street, and woe unto the crass tourist from Rome to Athens who dares to snigger at such a sight, for the Egyptians are as vengeful as they are pious.

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I found myself residing in Rhakotis for a number of reasons. For one thing, a young Roman of little wealth could find lodgings there to suit his means. But Rhakotis offered far more than cheap dwellings. To feed my mind, I could listen to the philosophers who lectured to their students and debated one another on the steps of the library attached to the Temple of Serapis. To feed my stomach, vendors at crowded street corners hawked exotic delicacies unheard of in Rome. As for the other appetites common to young men, those were easily satisfied as well; the Alexandrians consider themselves to be the most worldly of people, and any Roman who disputes the point only demonstrates his own unworldliness.

One morning I happened to be walking through one of the district's less crowded streets when I heard a noise behind me. It was a vague, indistinct noise, like the sound of a roaring crowd some distance away. The government of Egypt is notoriously unstable, and riots are fairly common, but it seemed too early in the day for people to be raging through the streets. Nevertheless, as I paused to listen, the noise became louder and the echoey din resolved into the sound of angry human voices.

A moment later, a man in a blue tunic appeared from around a bend in the street, running headlong toward me, his head turned to look behind him. I hurriedly stepped out of the way, but he blindly changed his course and ran straight into me. We tumbled to the ground in a confusion of arms and legs.

"Numa's balls!" I shouted, for the fool had caused me to scrape my hands and knees on the rough paving stones.

The stranger suddenly stopped his mad scramble to get to his feet and stared at me. He was a man of middle age, well groomed and obviously well fed. There was absolute panic in his eyes, but also a glimmer of hope.

"You curse in Latin!" he said hoarsely. "You're a Roman, then, like me?"

"Yes."

"Countryman—save me!" By this time we were both on our feet again, but the stranger moved in such a spastic manner and clutched at me so desperately that I thought he might pull us to the ground again.

The noise of angry voices grew nearer. The man looked back to the way he had come. Fear danced across his face like a flame. He clutched me with both hands and kept his eyes on the bend.

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"I swear, I never touched the beast!" he whispered hoarsely. "The little girl said I killed it, but it was already dead when I came upon it."

"What are you saying?"

"The cat! I didn't kill the cat! It was already dead, lying in the street. But they'll tear me limb from limb, these mad Egyptians! If I can only reach my house—"

At that moment, a number of people appeared at the bend in the street, men and women dressed in the tattered clothing of the poorer classes. More people appeared, and more, shouting and twisting their faces into expressions of pure hatred. They came rushing toward us, some of them brandishing sticks and knives, others shaking their bare fists in the air.

"Help me!" the man shrieked, his voice breaking like a boy's. "Save me! I'll reward you!" The mob was almost upon us. I struggled to escape his grip. At last he broke away and resumed his headlong flight. As the angry mob drew nearer, for a moment it seemed that I had become the object of their quest. Indeed, a few of them headed straight for me, and I saw no possibility of escape. "Death comes as the end," goes the Egyptian poem, and I felt it drawing very near.

But a man near the front of the crowd, notable for his great long beard curled in the Babylonian fashion, saw the mistake and shouted in a booming voice, "Not that one! The man in blue is the one we want! Up there, at the end of the street! Quick, or he'll escape us again!"

The men and women who had been ready to strike me veered away at the last moment and ran on. I drew into a doorway, out of sight, and marveled at the size of the mob as it passed by. Half the residents of Rhakotis were after the Roman in blue!

Once the mob had passed, I stepped back into the street. Following the mob were a number of stragglers unable to keep up the pace. Among them I recognized a man who sold pastries from a shop on the Street of the Breadmakers. He was breathing hard but walked at a deliberate pace. In his hand he clutched a wooden rod for rolling dough. I knew him as a fat, cheerful baker whose chief joy was filling other people's stomachs, but on this morning he wore the grim countenance of a determined avenger.

"Menapis, what is happening?" I said, falling into step beside him.

He gave me such a withering look that I thought he did not recognize me, but when he spoke it was all too clear that he did. "You Romans come here with your pompous ways and your ill-gotten

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wealth, and we do our best to put up with you. You foist yourselves upon us, and we endure it. But when you turn to desecration, you go too far! There are some things even a Roman can't get away with!"

"Menapis, tell me what's happened."

"He killed a cat! The fool killed a cat just a stone's throw from my shop!"

"Did you see it happen?"

"A little girl saw him do it. She screamed in terror, naturally enough, and a crowd came running. They thought the little girl was in danger, but it turned out to be something far worse. The Roman fool had killed a cat! We'd have stoned him to death right on the spot, but he managed to slip away and start running. The longer the chase went on, the more people came out to join it. He'll never escape us now. Look up ahead—the Roman rat must be trapped!"

The chase seemed to have ended, for the mob had come to a stop in a wide square. If they had overtaken him, the man in blue must already have been trampled to a pulp, I thought, with a feeling of nausea. But as I drew nearer, the crowd began to chant: "Come out! Come out! Killer of the cat!" Beside me, Menapis took up the chant with the others, slapping his rolling pin against his palm and stamping his feet.

It seemed that the fugitive had taken refuge in a prosperous-looking house. From the faces that stared in horror from the upper-story windows before they were thrown shut, the place appeared to be full of Romans—the man's private dwelling, it seemed. That he was a man of no small means I had already presumed from the quality of his blue tunic, but the size of his house confirmed it. A rich merchant, I thought—but neither silver nor a silvery tongue was likely to save him from the wrath of the mob. They continued to chant and began to beat upon the door with clubs.

Menapis shouted, "Clubs will never break such a door! We'll have to make a battering ram." I looked at the normally genial baker beside me and a shiver ran up my spine. All of this—for a cat!

I withdrew to a quieter corner of the square, where a few of the local residents had ventured out of their houses to watch the commotion. An elderly Egyptian woman, impeccably dressed in a white linen gown, gazed at the mob disparagingly. "What a rabble!" she remarked to no one in particular. "What are they thinking of, attacking the house of a man like Marcus Lepidus?"

"Your neighbor?" I said.

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"For many years, as was his father before him. An honest Roman trader, and a greater credit to Alexandria than any of this rabble will ever be. Are you a Roman, too, young man?"

"Yes."

"I thought so, from your accent. Well, I have no quarrel with Romans. Dealing with men like Marcus Lepidus and his father made my late husband a wealthy man. Whatever has Marcus done to bring such a mob to his door?"

"They accuse him of killing a cat."

She gasped. A look of horror contorted her wrinkled face. "That would be unforgivable!"

"He claims to be innocent. Tell me, who else lives in that house?"

"Marcus Lepidus lives with his two cousins. They help him run his affairs, I believe."

"And their wives?"

"The cousins are married, but their wives and children remain in Rome. Marcus is a widower. He has no children. Look there! What madness is this?"

Moving through the mob like a crocodile through lily pads was a great uprooted palm tree. At the head of those who carried it I saw the man with the Babylonian beard. As they aligned the tree perpendicular to the door of Marcus Lepidus's house, its purpose became unmistakable: it was a battering ram.

"I didn't kill the cat!" Marcus Lepidus had said. And, *"Help me! Save me!"* And—no less significantly, to my ears—*"I'll reward you!"* It seemed to me, as a fellow Roman and as a man of honor who had been called on for help, that my course was clear: if the man in blue was innocent of the crime, it was my duty to help him however I could. If duty alone did not suffice, the fact that my stomach was growling and my purse was nearly empty tipped the scales conclusively.

I would need to act swiftly.

The way to the Street of the Breadmakers, usually thronged with people, was almost deserted; the shoppers and the hawkers had all run off to kill the Roman, it seemed. The shop of Menapis was empty—peering within, I saw that piles of dough lay unshapen on the table and the fire in his oven had gone out. The cat had been killed, he said, only a stone's throw from his shop, and it was at about that distance, around the corner on a little side street, that I

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came upon a group of shaven-headed priests who stood in a circle with bowed heads.

Peering between the orange robes of the priests, I saw the corpse of the cat sprawled on the paving stones. It had been a beautiful creature, with sleek limbs and a coat of midnight black. That it had been deliberately killed could not be doubted, for its throat had been cut.

The priests knelt down and lifted the dead cat onto a small funeral bier, which they hoisted onto their shoulders. Chanting and lamenting, they began a slow procession toward the Temple of Bast.

I looked around, not quite sure how to proceed. A movement at a window above caught my eye, but when I looked up there was nothing to see. I kept looking until a tiny face appeared, then quickly disappeared again.

"Little girl," I called softly. "Little girl."

After a moment she reappeared. Her black hair was pulled back from her face, which was perfectly round. Her eyes were shaped like almonds and her lips formed a pout. "You talk funny," she said.

"Do I?"

"Like the other man."

"What other man?"

She appeared to ponder this for a moment, but did not answer. "Would you like to hear me scream?" she said. Not waiting for a reply, she did so.

The high-pitched wail stabbed at my ears and echoed weirdly in the empty street. I gritted my teeth until she stopped. "That," I said, "is quite a scream. Tell me, are you the little girl who screamed earlier today?"

"Perhaps."

"When the cat was killed, I mean."

She wrinkled her brow thoughtfully. "Not exactly."

"Are you not the little girl who screamed when the cat was killed?"

She considered this. "Did the man with the funny beard send you?" she finally said.

I thought for a moment and recalled the man with the Babylonian beard, whose shout had saved me from the mob in the street—"The man in blue is the one we want!"—and whom I had seen at the head of the battering ram. "A Babylonian beard, you mean, curled with an iron?"

"Yes," she said, "all curly, like sunrays shooting out from his chin."

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"He saved my life," I said. It was the truth.

"Oh, then I suppose it's all right to talk to you," she said. "Do you have a present for me, too?"

"A present?"

"Like the one he gave me." She held up a doll made of papyrus reeds and bits of rag.

"Very pretty," I said, beginning to understand. "Did he give you the doll for screaming?"

She laughed. "Isn't it silly? Would you like to hear me scream again?"

I shuddered. "Later, perhaps. You didn't really see who killed the cat, did you?"

"Silly! Nobody killed the cat, not really. The cat was just play-acting, like I was. Ask the man with the funny beard." She shook her head at my credulity.

"Of course," I said. "I knew that; I just forgot. So you think I talk funny?"

"*Yes, I do,*" she said, mocking my accent rather cruelly, I thought. Alexandrian children acquire a sharp sense of sarcasm very early in life. "You do talk funny."

"Like the other man, you said."

"Yes."

"You mean the man in the blue tunic, the one they ran after for killing the cat?"

Her round face lengthened a bit. "No, I never heard him talk, except when the baker and his friends came after him, and then he screamed. But I can scream louder."

She seemed ready to demonstrate, so I nodded quickly. "Who then? Who talks like I do? Ah, yes, the man with the funny beard," I said, but I knew I must be wrong even as I spoke, for the man had looked quite Egyptian to me, and certainly not Roman.

"No, not him, silly. The other man."

"What other man?"

"The man who was here yesterday, the one with the runny nose. I heard them talking together, over there on the corner, the funny beard and the one who sounds like you. They were talking and pointing and looking serious, the one with the beard pulling on his beard and the one with the runny nose blowing his nose, but finally they thought of something funny and they both laughed. 'And to think, your cousin is such a lover of cats!' said the funny beard. I could tell that they were planning a joke on somebody. I forgot all

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about it until this morning, when I saw the funny beard again and he asked me to scream when I saw the cat."

"I see. He gave you the doll, then he showed you the cat—"

"Yes, looking so dead it fooled everybody. Even the priests!"

"You screamed, people came running—then what happened?"

"The funny beard pointed at a man who was walking up the street and he shouted, 'The Roman did it! The man in blue! He killed the cat!' " She recited the lines with great conviction, holding up her doll as if it were an actor.

"The man with the runny nose, who talked like me," I said. "You're sure there was mention of his *cousin?"*

"Oh yes. I have a cousin, too. I play tricks on him all the time."

"What did this man with the Roman accent look like?"

She shrugged. "A man."

"Yes, but tall or short, young or old?"

She thought for a moment, then shrugged again. "Just a man, like you. Like the man in the blue tunic. All Romans look the same to me."

Then she screamed again, just to show me how well she could do it.

By the time I got back to the square a band of soldiers had arrived from the palace and were attempting, with limited success, to push back the mob. The soldiers were vastly outnumbered, and the mob would only be pushed back so far. Rocks and bricks were hurled against the building from time to time, some of them striking the already cracked shutters. It appeared that a serious attempt had been made to batter down the door, but the door had lost only a few splinters.

A factotum from the royal palace, a eunuch to judge by his high voice, appeared at the highest place in the square, on a rooftop next to the besieged house. He tried to quiet the mob, assuring them that justice would be done by King Ptolemy and his servants. It was in Ptolemy's interest, of course, to quell what might become an international incident; the murder of a wealthy Roman merchant by the people of Alexandria could cause him great political damage.

The eunuch warbled on, but the mob was unimpressed. To them, the issue was simple and clear: a Roman had ruthlessly murdered a cat, and they would not be satisfied until the Roman was dead. They took up their chant again, drowning out the eunuch: "Come out! Come out! Killer of the cat!"

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I had decided to get inside the house of Marcus Lepidus. Caution told me that such a course was mad—for how could I ever get out alive once I was in?—and, at any rate, apparently impossible, for if there were a simple way to get into the house the mob would already have found it. Then it occurred to me that someone standing on the rooftop where Ptolemy's eunuch had stood could conceivably jump or be lowered onto the roof of the besieged house.

It all seemed like a great deal of effort, until I heard the plaintive echo of the stranger's voice inside my head: *"Help me! Save me!"*

The building from which the eunuch spoke had been commandeered by soldiers, as had the other buildings adjacent to the besieged house, as a precaution to keep the mob from gaining entry through an adjoining wall or setting fire to the whole block. It took some doing to convince the guards to let me in, but the fact that I was a Roman and claimed to know Marcus Lepidus eventually gained me an audience with the king's eunuch.

Royal servants come and go in Alexandria; those who fail to satisfy their masters become food for crocodiles and are quickly replaced. This royal servant was clearly feeling the pressure of serving a monarch who might snuff out his life with the mere arching of an eyebrow. He had been sent to quell an angry mob and to save the life of a Roman citizen, and at the moment his chances of succeeding looked distinctly uncertain. He could call for more troops, perhaps, and slaughter the mob, but such a bloodbath could lead to an even graver situation, given the instability of the Egyptian state. Complicating matters even more was the presence of a high priest of Bast, who dogged (if I may use that expression) the eunuch's every step, yowling and waving his orange robes and demanding that justice be done at once in the name of the murdered cat.

The eunuch was receptive to any ideas that I might offer. "You're a friend of this man the mob is after?" he asked.

"This *murderer,*" the high priest corrected.

"An acquaintance, yes," I said—and truthfully, if having exchanged a few desperate words after colliding in the street could be called an acquaintance. "In fact, I'm his agent. He's hired me to get him out of this mess." This was also true, after a fashion. "And I think I know who really killed the cat!" This was not quite true, but might become so if the eunuch would cooperate with me. "You must get me into Marcus Lepidus's house. I was thinking that your soldiers might lower me onto his roof by a rope."

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The eunuch became thoughtful. "By the same route, we might rescue Marcus Lepidus himself by having him climb a rope up onto this building, where my men can better protect him."

"Rescue a cat-killer? Give him armed protection?" The priest was outraged. The eunuch bit his lip.

At last it was agreed that the king's men would supply a rope by which I could make my way onto the roof of the besieged house. "But you cannot return to this building by the same route," the eunuch insisted.

"Why not?" I had a sudden vision of the house being set aflame with myself inside it, or of an angry mob breaking through the door and setting upon all the inhabitants with knives and clubs.

"Because the rope will be visible from the square," snapped the eunuch. "If the mob sees someone leaving the house, they'll assume it's the man they're after. Then they'll break into this building! No, I'll allow you passage to your countryman's house, but after that you'll be on your own."

I thought for a moment and then agreed. Behind the eunuch, the high priest of Bast smiled like a cat, no doubt anticipating my imminent demise and purring at the idea of yet another impious Roman departing from the shores of the living.

As I was lowered onto the merchant's roof, the household slaves realized what was happening and set up an alarm. They surrounded me at once and seemed determined to throw me into the square below, but I held up my hands to show them that I was unarmed and I cried out that I was a friend of Marcus Lepidus. My accent seemed to sway them. At last they took me down a flight of steps to meet their master.

The man in blue had withdrawn to a small chamber which I took to be his office, for it was cluttered with scrolls and scraps of papyrus. He recognized my face at once.

"But why have you come here, stranger?" he said, looking at me as if I were either a lemur sent to haunt him or a demigod to save him.

"Because you asked for my help, Marcus Lepidus. And because you offered me a reward," I said bluntly. "My name is Gordianus."

Beyond the shuttered window, which faced the square, the crowd began to chant again. A heavy object—a piece of stone or a clay bottle—struck the shutters with a crash. Marcus gave a start and bit his knuckles.

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"These are my cousins, Rufus and Appius," he said, introducing two younger men who had just entered the room. Like their older cousin, they were well groomed and well dressed, and like him they appeared to be on the verge of panic.

"The guards outside are beginning to weaken," said Rufus shrilly. "What are we going to do, Marcus?"

"If they break into the house they'll slaughter us all!" said Appius, equally agitated.

"You're obviously a man of wealth, Marcus Lepidus," I said. "A trader, I understand."

"Why, yes," he said. All three cousins looked at me blankly, confused at my apparent disregard for the crisis immediately at hand. "I own a fleet of ships. We carry grain and slaves and other goods from Alexandria to Rome and elsewhere." Talking about his work calmed him noticeably, as reciting a familiar chant calms a worshiper in a temple.

"Do you own the business jointly with your cousins?" I asked.

"The business is mine," said Marcus proudly. "Inherited from my father."

"Yours alone? You have no brothers?"

"None."

"And your cousins are merely employees, not partners?"

"If you put it that way."

I looked at Rufus, the taller of the cousins. Was it fear of the mob I read on his face, or the bitterness of old resentments? His cousin Appius began to pace the room, biting his fingernails and casting what I took to be hostile glances at me.

"I understand you have no sons, Marcus Lepidus," I said.

"No. My first wife gave me only daughters; they all died of fever. My second wife was barren. I have no wife at present, but I soon will, when the girl arrives from Rome. Her parents are sending her by ship, and they promise me that she will be fertile, like her sisters. This time next year, I could be a proud father at last!" He managed a weak smile, then bit his knuckles. "But what's the use of contemplating my future when I have none? Curse all the gods of Egypt, to have put that dead cat in my path!"

"I think it was not a god who did so," I said. "Tell me, Marcus Lepidus, though Jupiter forbid such a tragedy, if you should die without a son, who would inherit your property?"

"My cousins would inherit in equal portions," said Marcus.

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Rufus and Appius both looked at me gravely. Another stone struck the shutters and we all gave a start. It was impossible to read their faces for any subtle signs of guilt.

"I see. Tell me, Marcus Lepidus, who could have known, yesterday, that you would be walking up that side street in Rhakotis this morning?"

He shrugged. "I make no secret of my pleasures. There is a certain house on that street where I spend certain nights in the company of a certain catamite. Having no wife at present . . ."

"Then either of your cousins might have known that you would be coming home by that route this morning?"

"I suppose," he said, shrugging. If he was too agitated to see the point, his cousins were not. Rufus and Appius both stared at me darkly and glanced dubiously at one another.

At that moment a gray cat came sauntering into the room, its tail flicking, its head held high, apparently oblivious to the chaos outside the house or the despair of those within. "The irony of it all!" wailed Marcus Lepidus, suddenly breaking into tears. "The bitter irony! I, of all men, would never kill a cat! The creatures adore me, and I adore them. I give them a place of honor in my home, I feed them delicacies from my own plate. Come, precious one." He stooped down and made a cradle for the cat, who obligingly pounced into his arms. The cat squirmed onto its back and purred loudly. Marcus Lepidus held the animal close to him. Caressing it seemed to soothe his own distress. Rufus appeared to share his older cousin's fondness for cats, for he smiled weakly and joined him in stroking the beast's belly.

I had reached an impasse. It seemed to me quite certain that at least one of the cousins had been in league with the bearded Egyptian in deliberately plotting the destruction of Marcus Lepidus, but which? If only the little girl had been able to give me a better description. "All Romans look the same" indeed!

"You and your cursed cats!" said Appius suddenly, wrinkling his nose and retreating to the far corner of the room. "It's the cats that do this to me. They cast some sort of hateful spell! Alexandria is full of them, making my life a misery. I never sneezed once in my life before I came here!" And with that he sneezed and sneezed and began to blow his runny nose.

What followed was not pretty, though it may have been just.

I accused Appius of plotting his cousin's death. I told Marcus Lepidus all I had learned from the little girl. I summoned him to

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the window and opened the shutters enough to point out the bearded Egyptian, who was now overseeing the construction of a bonfire in the square below. Marcus had seen the man before in the company of his cousin.

What outcome did I expect? I had meant to help a fellow Roman far from home, to save an innocent man from the wrath of an unreasoning mob, and to gain a few coins for my purse in the process—all honorable pursuits. Did I not realize that inevitably a man would die? I was younger then, and did not always think a thing through to its logical result.

The unleashed fury of Marcus Lepidus took me by surprise. Perhaps it should not have, considering the terrible shock he had suffered that day; considering also that he was a successful businessman, and therefore to some degree ruthless; considering finally that treachery within a family often drives men to acts of extreme revenge.

Quailing before Marcus Lepidus, Appius confessed his guilt. Rufus, whom he declared to be innocent of the plot, begged for mercy on his cousin's behalf, but his pleadings were ineffectual. Though we might be hundreds of miles from Rome, the rule of the Roman family held sway in that house in Alexandria, and all power resided in the head of the household. When Marcus Lepidus stripped off his blue tunic and ordered that his cousin Appius should be dressed in it, the slaves of the household obeyed; Appius resisted, but was overwhelmed. When Marcus ordered that Appius should then be thrown from the window into the mob, it was done.

Rufus, pale and trembling, withdrew into another room. Marcus made his face as hard as stone and turned away. The gray cat twined itself about his feet, but the solace it offered was ignored.

The bearded Egyptian, not realizing the substitution, screamed to the others in the mob to take their vengeance on the man in blue. It was only much later, when the mob had largely dispersed and the Egyptian was able to get a closer look at the trampled, bloody corpse, that he realized the mistake. I shall never forget the look on his face, which changed from a leer of triumph to a mask of horror as he approached the body, studied its face, and then looked up at the window where I stood. He had overseen the killing of his own confederate.

Perhaps it was fitting that Appius received the fate which he had intended for his cousin. No doubt he thought that while he waited, safe and sound in the family house, the bearded Egyptian would

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proceed with the plot as they had planned and his older cousin would be torn to pieces on the Street of the Breadmakers. He did not foresee that Marcus Lepidus would be able to elude the crowd and flee all the way to his house, where all three cousins became trapped. Nor did he foresee the intervention of Gordianus the Finder—or for that matter, the intervention of the gray cat, which caused him to betray himself with a sneeze.

Thus ended the episode of the Alexandrian cat, whose death was terribly avenged.

Some days after telling this tale to Lucius Claudius, I chanced to visit him again at his house on the Palatine. I was surprised to see that a new mosaic had been installed on his doorstep. The colorful little tiles pictured a snarling Molossian mastiff, together with the stern caption, CAVE CANEM, "Beware the Dog."

A slave admitted me and escorted me to the garden at the center of the house. As I approached I heard a yapping noise, accompanied by deep-throated laughter. I came upon Lucius Claudius, who sat with what appeared to be a gigantic white rat on his lap.

"What on earth is that?" I exclaimed.

"This is my darling, my sweet, my adorable little Momo."

"Your doorstep shows a Molossian mastiff, which that animal most certainly is not."

"Momo is a Melitaean terrier—tiny, true, but very fierce," said Lucius defensively. As if to prove her master's point, the little lapdog began to yap again. Then she nervously began lapping at Lucius's chin, which he appeared to enjoy immensely.

"The doorstep advises visitors to beware this beast," I said sceptically.

"As indeed they should—especially unwelcomed visitors of the four-footed variety."

"You expect this dog to keep cats away?"

"I do! Never again shall my peace be violated by those accursed creatures, not with little Momo here to protect me. Is that not right, Momo? Are you not the fiercest cat-chaser who ever lived? Brave, bold little Momo—"

I rolled my eyes upward at this display of enthusiasm, and caught a glimpse of something black and sleek on the roof. It was almost certainly the cat who had terrified Lucius before.

An instant later the terrier was out of her master's lap, performing a frantic circular dance on the floor, yapping madly and

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baring her teeth. Up on the roof, the black cat arched its back, hissed, and disappeared.

"There, you see, Gordianus! Beware this dog, all you cats of Rome!" Lucius scooped the dog up in his arms and kissed her nose. "There, there, Momo, and disbelieving Gordianus doubted you . . ."

I thought of a truism I had learned from Bethesda: there are those who love cats, and those who love dogs, and never shall the two agree. But we could at least share a cup of wine, Lucius Claudius and I, and exchange the latest gossip from the Forum.

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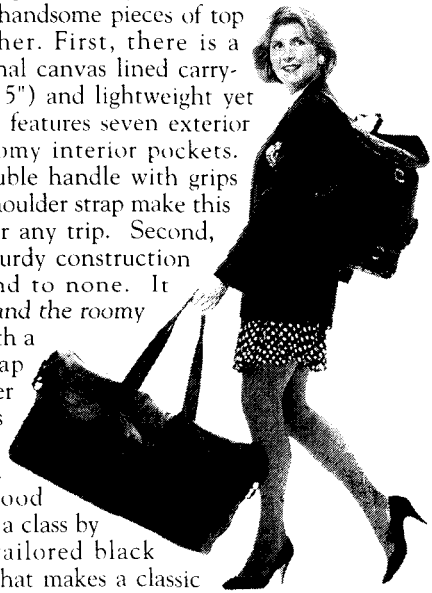

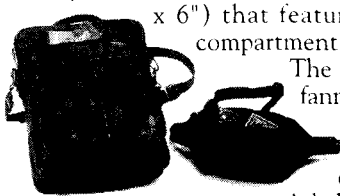

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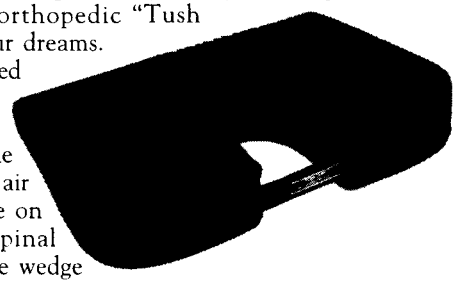

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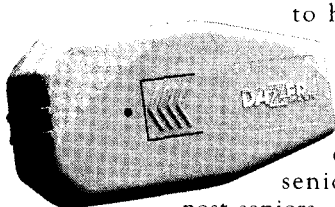

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Seymour Shubin is a full-time freelance writer who currently resides in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania. In this short piece he departs from classic detection to indulge in a little dark satire . . .

MEETING OF THE MINDS

by SEYMOUR SHUBIN

He's the only one she recognizes. He's been at every one of the three executions.

Scheduled executions, that is. (She has been precise all her life; and neat. It started when she was a child: her copybook, for instance, was one of those the teachers always used to pass around in class.) One had been stopped by a last-hour commutation, another by a last-minute reprieve. Only one had gone to term.

It's cold, but fortunately not windy; the candles are flickering enough. Occasionally she holds a hand around the flame. The cold has seeped through her gloves, the leather stiffening around her fingers. She has a muffler bundled around her throat. There's a drop of mucus on one nostril. She's almost tired of sniffing it back.

"Wilbur, Wilbur, ain't it swell,
When we go home you'll be in hell!"

Each time the other group roars it out, something leaps behind her eyes, jerks them to their corners. It happens involuntarily, she doesn't want those people, those dreadful, poor, sad—sad in the sense of ignorant—those poor sad ugly vicious people to know she as much as hears them.

The field is almost white with light from portable floodlights. About twenty yards separate the two groups, with a few state troopers in between. And some one hundred yards separate them from the walls of the prison.

She lowers her head; most of the people in her group have been standing with lowered heads most of the time, probably from the cold, though some may be interspersing prayer. She prays now and then, though she's actually not a very religious person, which surprises some of the people she knows.

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"Wilbur, Wilbur, ain't it swell,
When we go home you'll be in hell!"
This time her eyes don't go to them.

She understands their anger—who wouldn't? Wilbur Ray had literally slaughtered his wife—over fifty stab wounds and slashes. Self-defense, he'd claimed, though the bathroom wastebasket he said she'd wielded was hardly a weapon.

Still, society shouldn't take it on itself; it was a worse murder, if there was any such thing as a worse murder. . . .

She feels movement against her shoulder and she sways with the swaying of her group. They don't say anything, they don't sing anything, not aloud anyway, just sway from side to side, each with his or her own thoughts. They've been doing it every so often during the several hours they've been out here.

The other group doesn't seem to have the same kind of solidarity, except when they chant those words. Otherwise it's as though each person is on his or her own, swinging about, a hand upraised as though holding an imaginary beer (No drinking out here, the officials warned) or bending over to laugh with each other—no, *roar* is more like it. They find this so uproariously funny.

Each time, at each of the executions, some of them—*most* of them in her mind, though she had no real proof of this—coming up on motorcycles, swerving to a fast stop, and then swinging off and greeting each other.

He is one of those who seems to know everyone here, though he, she'd noticed the second time, wasn't a biker. He drove up in a two-door Mercedes.

He wonders angrily what the hell she is doing out here, has wondered about it from the first time he saw her. Although he's not said a word to her, she—for some reason, more than any of the other women over there—symbolizes everything he can't stand about women. Just *being* here, when she ought to be home minding babies or making a meal.

Geez.

That is just about the worst "epithet" Bob uses, even in his mind, where no one's around to hear. He uses it mostly whenever he's totally confused or astounded.

As he sees it, the whole world is in danger of being taken over by women. Or *homos*. If not literally taken over, then philosophically, which is the same thing. Make men pussy.

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That's the other epithet he uses, though it's not as much of a one as it used to be, not since his son started bringing it home when he was maybe in the sixth grade.

"Wilbur, Wilbur . . ."

He lifts his face as he joins in, turning to the guy next to him with a grin, then to the one on the other side, then to the two ladies in back—a couple of the bikers' old ladies. They ought to be home too, but at least they weren't *pussy*.

". . . When we go home . . ."

The chanting suddenly begins drifting off into silence. It started somewhere, he doesn't know where, but now only one or two voices are carrying on, and they're fading off.

He sees what's happening now, and there's a surge forward that quickly stops as word comes back from a small group that has bubbled out at the prison gates.

A cheer, and he joins in. All at once it's New Year's Eve and every other celebration all rolled in. He doesn't want to leave, no one does, but now, with the state troopers prodding them on, they're drifting back to their cars and bikes.

He sees her walking ahead, clutching herself.

He catches up with her, walks on, then slows up and looks back.

"Stay home!" he says, then hurries on. But it's only when he's in his car, driving away, that he regrets it. It brings him down to *their* level, all the pussies.

He feels squirmy inside, wishes he had it to do over. Then something else replaces this, something that's far from foreign to him. If there's one thing he'd like to know before he dies, and this is after one wife and maybe five hundred girlfriends, it's what makes women tick.

She hears her name—"Helen, phone"—as she's leaving Mrs. Hendrick's room. It's Melanie, at the nurses' station; she's standing up and motioning. Helen starts there, but thinks Mrs. Hendrick is calling to her, but when Helen walks back into the room Mrs. Hendrick is lying with her face to one side, her eyes closed. She looks peacefully asleep.

Helen doesn't know if she can handle any of this anymore. She has been doing oncological nursing for the past five years, and there have been many times she's felt it's too much, that she's burned out, but never more than now.

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She still carries with her the memory of the cheers that went up when the execution was announced. As much as anything—though that's probably not true—she hates the feeling of hate she has toward them. She doesn't always hate them, most of the time she feels sorry for them in a way, so it's an effort even to hate.

"For you," Melanie says, holding out the receiver as though Helen doesn't know this.

"Helen Varns?" a man says.

"Yes, who's this?"

Him? She can't believe it.

I'm, he'd said as though struggling with the words, that fellow the night before yesterday out there who said to you what he shouldn't.

In reaction, her hands almost smash the receiver back on the hook. But Helen is not only polite, she's curious. She's also a little afraid. There's a throbbing at the bottom of her throat.

"How do you know my name, where I work?" She almost whispers it, not wanting Melanie to hear; Melanie would think she's crazy not just hanging up, just as she, Helen, would think Melanie was crazy if she didn't hang up. But Melanie, deep in work at her desk, the fingers of one hand burrowed in her hair, either doesn't hear or is making believe.

"The paper," he says.

Oh. The first execution she went to, the one with the last-minute reprieve, a reporter asked her name. And it was in the paper.

"I see," she says, trying to think.

He wants to know, he is saying, if he can see her. Just for a few minutes. He wants to apologize and he wants to ask her something.

"No, I'm sorry, I can't. And you've already apologized. Thank you."

Wait, he didn't mean like a date, he says. Maybe—when she leaves?—like downstairs in the lobby?

"No, I'm sorry." He's *really* scaring her now.

"To tell the truth," he says, "what I'm really interested in is your thinking. I like to know things, and I'd like to know your thinking."

He *is* crazy, she's convinced, but not crazy in a *dangerous* way. If he were dangerous crazy, he wouldn't even ask her, he'd just be down there. But she still isn't about to say yes.

Until he says, "You're willing to let killers go free, but you won't even give me a chance to explain what I mean."

Which doesn't make all that much sense when she thinks about it later, but at the time it seems vaguely weighty, even somewhat profound. And her curiosity is still there. What's more, somehow

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she can't connect dangerous with a sports Mercedes.

She knows within ten minutes of meeting him that he is crazy. Still not dangerous, but nevertheless crazy.

He's a little taller than she recalls—about six feet—and a little blonder, and a lot more childlike and harmless-looking. He has a round face and he's almost always smiling. And she's a little older than he'd thought—about thirty-five, which is a year younger than he is; and she has pale skin and dry lips, which he associates with a teacher he had in grammar school who was mean to him, except in his fantasies, in his room after school, with his mother in the kitchen or his parents in front of the TV.

Bob seems perfectly reasonable to her for about the first ten minutes. He's a computer consultant and he has a sixteen-year-old son and he hates wearing jackets (he's wearing a nice lumber jacket); but then, as they're standing at one side of the lobby, near some of the oil portraits, he gradually goes crazy.

"I don't understand you women. I really don't." But he's smiling as he says it, a broad smile, so it's almost as though you can't take offense. "You want to run everything."

How, she wonders, did the conversation turn to "everything"? Where was the leap that took place? They'd been talking about capital punishment, and why it was she would go out there, and she'd tried to explain that it probably was similar to whatever took him there, only in reverse.

"Want to run everything," he repeats, and she keeps wondering what the connection is in his mind. "Well . . ." he says, apparently finished with that thought, and then he's back to capital punishment. "I still don't get your thinking, I don't understand it. There's this guy, he's committed the worst crime. Kills her, not only kills her—I mean, how many times does he stab her? I mean, he should be ripped apart. I mean it, ripped apart!"

She wonders, staring at him, does he have any idea of the rage boiling in him, that it probably wouldn't take all that much—

Then his face becomes soft.

"Geez," he says, shaking his head.

His son, Bob thinks, is such a moron when it comes to girls. He has all these girls running after him, and he is such a brain, but who does he keep seeing?—the little whore. A *homely* whore yet. Johnny had even loaned her the car Bob had bought him—a new BMW,

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how many sixteen-year-old kids their father buys them a brand-new BMW?—and of course you know what happened. She almost totaled it.

Which is the subject of this latest argument.

But it doesn't last long—like most of their arguments, it ends with Bob just motioning disgustedly at him. Johnny has chosen to live with him instead of his mother, and Bob doesn't want to do anything to lose him. But the kid better learn about women.

It's like butter wouldn't melt in their mouth. Until you married 'em.

Neither of them knows for sure how it came about—or *why,* might be more like it. Except that he called. And he apologized again, this time for "ranting and raving."

How about coffee? he asked, and so, after several more calls, here they are, neither of them quite sure why, at a little coffee shop near the hospital.

And soon he's ranting and raving again.

Only he doesn't seem to know it.

It seems to be just a *topic* to him; and this, just his way of speaking.

"Equal rights—geez!" His head goes back, his mouth open, and he seems to be perusing the heavens for comfort. His head comes forward. "What," he says with that grin, "do you need equal rights for? You got it *all.*"

"What are you so afraid of it for?"

"Afraid of it? Afraid of it? Oh," and his head goes back again. "You women," he says, coming forward, "have it so good you don't appreciate it."

He watches her as her body tenses, then as she sits back. Her eyes remain fixed on him.

He sees it, though, and he wonders if she knows—the something in her that seemed to leap up within her skin, that almost lifted her hands, fingers outstretched, toward his throat.

No wonder she goes to all those things with all those fruitcakes, swaying from side to side and whoo-ing and whoo-ing under their breath to God—"Save him, save him, all he did was murder someone."

If she only knew, he thinks, the murderous fury in her.

She knows exactly this time why she sees him again. It's very simple, she's thirty-six, she's tired—worn out, exhausted rather—from

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giving herself; God, she'd even begun writing letters for Amnesty International. And there's no one else—if the truth be known, there hasn't been a decent guy since her husband died six years ago—and he asked her. But she'd die before she'd let him touch her; *that* she knows, although this time he seems different. She never thought he would be the kind who would enjoy a ride in the country, and dinner by a fireplace. And she has learned a secret, which has worked wonders and kept both their blood pressures down. If he stayed off certain subjects, he was brilliant, gentle. So don't talk about anything that will set him off. And change the subject when he starts.

Johnny is talking again about colleges. Oh no, the kid is saying, nothing in the city.

The little ingrate, Bob thinks, wants to get away from him. There's a part of him that wants to punch him out, that wants to send him flying and sprawling across the room. Where would you be, he wants to cry out, without me? Your mother, what has she done for you? Cheated, left us both. And I do everything . . .

But he knows that whatever he says, the boy's going to leave. And he doesn't know how he's going to handle the emptiness. He knows a lot of women, but just about every one of them is sore at him. They don't let him *talk*. At least Helen, at least Helen lets him talk . . .

They're parked in front of her apartment house. They've gone to a show. He'd never seen Shakespeare before, not since a high-school play, that is—and his first reaction to her suggestion was a roll of the eyes and *geez*. But he barely squirmed after the first fifteen minutes, and he didn't make fun of it later, as she thought he might, and he even had some interesting comments, though he was sooo far off on a couple of things that she had to restrain herself not to correct him.

"So that's pretty much it . . ."

He's been talking about his marriage for the first time. She feels so sorry for him; her heart has been beating quickly, she's been reliving it all with him. No wonder he has all these feelings against women. And to top it off, there was his childhood—a mother who dragged him through three marriages, not counting the one with his father.

His arm is around her. But he's strangely shy. She rests within the curve of his shoulder, then after a few moments releases herself and puts her arm around him and draws him close. She encloses

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him in her arms, then lowers her face for his kiss.

Passion leaps up at her, and from her to him.

She takes a deep breath, she's almost out of breath, and leans back. Then they hold each other tightly. They will be going up to her apartment soon. But it's as though they want to wait, to make this different.

He finds himself thinking of Johnny. For the first time in a long while there's no pain. More than that—go take a flying leap, you lousy kid.

And she's thinking, All he has ever needed in his life is a good woman.

It's a large, formal affair. Neither of them wanted it, but it just grew. She's particularly happy that her mother's so happy. And she's so happy for herself.

He's such a handsome guy, she thinks, seeing Bob's face even as she's staring at the minister.

One of the most important things they've settled on is that each will be his/her own person, that they will give each other space. He has even agreed—who would have believed it?—to omit "honor and obey" from the vows.

He even glances at her when they come to the place where it would have been; she knows because she glances at him also. They exchange the faintest smiles.

The minister's voice draws their eyes back to him.

". . . till death," he is saying, "do thee part."

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a *NEW* Michael Vlado story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

When this issue goes to press your editors will be en route to the 1993 Bouchercon World Mystery Convention in Omaha, Nebraska. Author Edward D. Hoch is not only one of the speakers at this year's convention, he is a nominee for the Anthony Award for Best Short Story for his November 1992 story for EQMM, *"The Summer of Our Discontent." The nomination is a well-deserved tribute to Mr. Hoch's contributions to our genre, and we wish him luck when the winner is chosen . . .*

THE PUZZLE GARDEN

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It had been many months since Michael Vlado's old friend Segar had driven up the twisty roads of the Transylvanian foothills to visit him at the Gypsy village where he was a somewhat uncertain leader. " 'King' only means that I'd be the first to die if the government moved against us," Michael had remarked to his wife Rosanna only the night before. These were not good days to be a Gypsy in Romania. Some of his people had already moved on to Germany, but they had only found a more immediate hell awaiting them there.

So Michael chose to remain in his village, always watching the road for the unexpected. When he recognized Segar's government car that warm spring morning he felt a jolt of alarm. Once a captain in the government militia responsible for law enforcement, Segar had assumed a vague position with the transition government. He could be delivering bad news for Michael's people.

"My old friend!" Segar greeted him with a smile, and Michael immediately relaxed. There was nothing to fear.

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"It's been a long time."

Segar nodded sadly. His gray suit seemed worn and drab compared to the bright militia uniform he'd often worn in those years when they first became friends. "I do not have the freedom I once had. I am chained to a bureaucrat's desk eight hours a day."

"At least you managed to escape on this bright May morning."

Segar's smile returned. "I came to ask your help. Have you ever heard of the Garden of the Apostles?"

It was vague in Michael's mind. "On the estate of the Sibiu family, wasn't it? I was only five when the Communist government began the collectivization of agriculture and large estates back in nineteen forty-nine. I remember my mother's concern for the Gypsy farmland when I was growing up, but in the end farmers were permitted to retain half-acre plots for private use. No one here has ever had more than that."

Segar nodded, but it was obvious his interest was in the present rather than the past. "After the overthrow of the Socialist government in nineteen eighty-nine, the estate was quietly returned to the rightful heirs of the Sibiu family. The Garden of the Apostles is gradually returning to its past beauty and may someday reopen to the public."

"I am a horse breeder, not a gardener," Michael reminded his friend. "What help could I give you in this matter?"

"It seems that something of great value was buried in the garden long ago, before the Communists seized power. Even Claus Sibiu and his wife have no idea exactly where it's located. Naturally they want me to find it before the grounds are opened to the public."

"You want me for a treasure hunt!"

"In a sense. I thought the puzzle might intrigue you."

"When?"

"Now. Today, if you can get away."

They walked up to the house while Michael spoke with his wife Rosanna. "I'll try to be back tonight, or tomorrow certainly."

She was a long-suffering woman who sought peace among the little wooden animals she skillfully carved. His absences were nothing new. "I will expect you when I see you," she told him. "Are the horses penned?"

"Everything is fine."

She glanced over at Segar. "It is good to see you again. How is life in Bucharest?"

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"Improving gradually. There have been no antigovernment protests this month."

"We are thankful for anything these days."

Michael kissed her lightly on the cheek. "I will be back," he said, and then they were gone.

The estate of the Sibiu family was at the base of the foothills where the land finally flattened out on the road south to Bucharest. They turned off the highway at a weathered sign that said Sibiu in barely legible lettering. "Does anyone still come here?" Michael asked.

"If the government is ever stabilized, Claus Sibiu plans to open the grounds to tourists, as in the prewar days. That is why the Garden of the Apostles is being restored."

"Do you know Sibiu?"

"I met him with his wife at a reception in Bucharest a few months back. Last week he phoned me with their problem. They have new growth starting in the gardens and they hope the public will be able to view them soon. However, Claus Sibiu recently uncovered a letter from his father, who died of a heart attack shortly after being forced from his home by the Communists. The letter gave clues to the whereabouts of a statue that the elder Sibiu had hidden in the garden to keep it safe. Claus wondered if I might be able to help decipher it."

"A code?"

"Not really. I gather it's more a puzzle to be solved. They don't want to dig up the entire garden if they can pinpoint where this thing is buried."

Michael smiled. "A treasure hunt, as I said earlier."

"Does it not appeal to you?"

"It might be relaxing after some of the problems I've had to face lately." They'd paused before the big iron gates of the estate, which seemed to show a family crest entwined with vines of metallic ivy. Segar beeped his horn gently and presently a middle-aged woman in khaki pants and a work shirt came to admit them. She was large-boned and handsome in a rugged way, as if much of her life had been lived out of doors.

Michael assumed she was one of the estate's gardeners, and was startled when Segar called out, "Good day, Madame Sibiu. I am here to see your husband."

"Captain Segar!" she greeted him, swinging open the gate for their car.

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"Not Captain any longer, I fear. In the new order of things I am only a government bureaucrat. Your husband phoned last week to suggest that I help him in his search for the statue of Cynthia, believed to be hidden in the Garden of the Apostles."

Her quick eyes went from Segar to Michael. "That would be most kind. And you bring with you an assistant?"

"I am Michael Vlado, a poor Gypsy with some knowledge of puzzles. My friend Segar thought I could help."

She nodded. "Park your car inside the gate, off the road, and we will walk to the garden. It is only a short distance from here."

They followed her along a path that had been cut through the haphazard growth of decades. Their drive down from Michael's village had taken much of the afternoon and the shadows of the spring day were already lengthening. Michael tried to remember what he had heard about the Garden of the Apostles. As he remembered it there were twelve sections, one designated for each of the followers of Christ. The flowers and plantings in each were in keeping with the apostle's life and Christian symbolism.

"You and your husband have done wonders here," Segar told her as they emerged from the path onto the open lawn at the front of an old stone mansion badly in need of repairs.

The house, with its dull gray facade and gabled roof, was a perfect background for the blaze of spring flowers that burst upon Michael's eyes. The Garden of the Apostles, at least in this current reincarnation, was a formal planting of twelve raised beds, each about ten feet square and enclosed by a wooden frame. From where they stood there were three rows of four beds each, running across the front of the house.

"Viewed from the house the order is alphabetical," Mrs. Sibiu explained. "Andrew's garden is here and Thomas, Doubting Thomas is at the opposite corner."

They strolled among the flowerbeds, pausing occasionally to comment on a small tree or a particularly lovely planting. "Everything seems to be in blossom at once," Segar remarked, trying to take it all in.

"Claus and I tried to rebuild the garden using paintings and drawings from medieval monasteries. Most of these show spring gardens, so we have a preponderance of spring blossoms. But there will be blossoms of some sort throughout the summer and autumn." She led them toward the front steps. "Come to the house now. My husband will tell you more about it and explain our particular problem."

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As he was mounting the stone steps Michael caught a glimpse of two men ducking out of sight around the corner of the house. "Are those gardeners?" he asked, thinking it odd that they would hide from view.

"Damned Gypsies!" she exclaimed angrily. "They did some work for us and the one in the red kerchief tried to steal our tools."

Segar and Michael exchanged glances but said no more. Inside the house Ida Sibiu ran up the wide front staircase calling to her husband. "Claus—Mr. Segar is here with a friend!"

While they waited, Michael had an opportunity to inspect the sparse but elegant furnishings of the large house. A marble-topped table with thick gilt legs stood in the foyer and on it was a framed photograph of Claus and Ida Sibiu, on vacation or perhaps in exile, posed at the railing of a cruise ship of some sort. She was almost as tall as he was, and they might have passed for brother and sister. Their smiles in the photograph were virtually identical, as if they were already contemplating the money awaiting them back in a free *Romania*.

"That was on a cruise to the Greek Islands two years ago," a voice announced from the stairs. "It was our fifth anniversary."

Michael turned to see the man with the fringe of beard and thinning hairline descending the steps. He was a bit thinner than in the photo but still immediately recognizable. Segar came forward to shake his hand. "It is good to see you again, Mr. Sibiu. This is my friend Michael Vlado, who has come to assist us."

Sibiu stepped forward to shake Michael's hand. "Ida told me she'd given you a brief look at the garden."

"Very impressive," Michael told him. "It must take a great deal of work."

"That is Ida's province. She often neglects the house to work in the garden, but she says that is what will bring the tourists." He spoke slowly and carefully, as if unsure of the language. "You can see that our furnishings are sparse."

"This marble-topped table is lovely," Segar told him. "And this wall plaque of a golden moon—"

"Ida found it in Rome during our travels." The plaque was nearly two feet across, perfectly round but with the graceful curve of a half-moon etched on its surface. "She thought at first it might be by Picasso because of that odd representation of the moon's face."

Michael had moved on to a painting of a Roman galley under full sail. "Is this one old?"

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"The last century, but not too valuable. The Communists did not even bother to steal it when they went through the house. I used to love it as a child here."

"When were you forced to leave?" Michael asked.

"In the summer of forty-nine when they began seizing property. I was just a boy but my father wanted me safely out of here. The Communists became Socialists in nineteen sixty-five, but no less repressive."

Segar cleared his throat, anxious to get on with the business at hand. "You told me on the telephone that you had found a message left by your father."

"I have it here." He was wearing a short maroon dressing gown over dark pants and a white shirt. From the gown's pocket he drew a folded envelope. "We found this among his papers when they were returned to us by the transition government. Apparently no one had ever opened it over all these years. My father mentions a buried statue which could be very valuable."

Segar accepted the envelope and withdrew a folded sheet of paper. "We had warehouses full of personal papers and possessions seized from the wealthy. You are lucky they could even find this to return it." He read the message with a deepening frown and then passed it on to Michael, who read it aloud :

> My son, you have been gone from me only two weeks and already I yearn for your presence. If you should come back I pray that this message reaches you someday. Among the Apostles I have buried a likeness of Cynthia which is unique and valuable. This is for you, my son, and not for those who would destroy our country. Seek out the garden of the last Apostle and there you will find the treasure.

"This is his signature?" Segar asked.

"I believe so. It seems to match others we found among his papers."

"When was this written?" Michael wondered.

"There's a lightly penciled date on the back of the envelope, right here. It says February twenty-four, nineteen forty-nine."

Segar examined the envelope. "Who is Cynthia? An ancestor?"

"No one I'm aware of. My father's books were returned along with his papers, and I tried to find the name in an edition of Bulfinch's *Age of Fable*. It's not there."

"Has any searching been done?" Michael Vlado asked.

"Come into the garden. I will show you."

They followed him out the front door and down the steps to the twelve sections of the Garden of the Apostles. The rosebushes were

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not quite in blossom, but there were tulips and lilies and even a small magnolia tree in various stages of bloom. They saw now that one bed of the garden had been dug into recently, and an attempt made to repair the damage.

"Our only clue was mention of the garden of the last Apostle," Claus Sibiu explained. "The Apostles are listed four times in the New Testament, in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and the Acts. Each time Judas is listed last. The indication is that he was the last one chosen, but he may be last only because he later betrayed Christ. In any event, we dug up part of this garden and found nothing. A couple of Gypsies camping on the property helped us, but we were unsuccessful. Ida claimed the Gypsies tried to steal our tools and we stopped using them."

"They are still here," Michael said. "We saw them earlier."

"No doubt. The pests are hard to drive off."

"What do you want from us?" Segar asked him.

"If we have to dig up all twelve gardens to find this statue, it will set back progress to open the estate to the public for at least a year. I was hoping the government could offer some solution to the puzzle."

Segar gave a snort. "You need a priest, not a bureaucrat. I have no idea who the last Apostle was, or even the first."

"Simon Peter," Michael said. He remembered that much, how Christ had come upon Peter and his brother Andrew casting their fishing net into the sea.

But already the darkness was descending. Any further examination of the twelve gardens would have to wait until morning. "We have five bedrooms," Sibiu told them. "Please stay the night and we can examine the place by the light of day. It is already too late for your return to Bucharest." He glanced at the watch on his right wrist.

Segar and Michael exchanged glances. The puzzle itself held little interest for Michael, who was inclined to think that the mysterious statue might well have been dug up decades ago by the Communist government. Still, the presence of the two Gypsies on the land interested him. They might know something, if he could find them again and speak with them. "We could stay," he told Segar.

His old friend chewed at his lower lip. "I must be in my office by afternoon, but perhaps we could stay long enough to have a quick look in the morning. I have no fondness for driving these roads after dark."

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"Very good!" Claus Sibiu seemed pleased. "I ate early this evening, shortly before your arrival, but Ida can prepare something light for you before you retire. I will look forward to continuing our analysis of this puzzle in the morning."

He left them in the large, well-stocked kitchen, and presently Ida Sibiu appeared wearing an emerald-green robe. Michael wondered if it was their custom to retire at nightfall each evening, like the birds.

"I have prepared the large guest room at the front of the house," she told them, "overlooking the garden. It has only one large bed—"

"That's all right," Michael assured her.

She prepared a light supper of soup and cold meat which tasted good to Michael. Then she joined them at the table with a bottle of German beer. "You have to forgive us for the food," she apologized, wiping a drop of blood from a cut she'd inflicted on her left wrist. "We have not entertained since Claus regained the estate from the government. I've even lost the knack of carving meat!"

"You have not been married long?" Segar asked.

She shrugged. "Nearly seven years. But of course in middle age that is only a small fraction of our lives. I met him in Greece and he would tell me fabulous stories of his great estate back here in Romania. He never thought he would see it again, nor did I. Then the Communist and Socialist governments began to topple. It was all so fast, all at once! Claus made application to the provisional government for the return of his property and no one was more surprised than he when the request was granted. We came back last year to find the place was like a jungle."

"You've done wonders with it."

"But we must open it to the public to generate some income! Claus is not a wealthy man. What money he had was drained away by his years of living in exile. Once we even tried to sneak back into Romania, in disguise, but I was nervous about it and we turned back before we reached home."

"Home. This estate."

She nodded sadly. "For him it was always home. He has told me he wants to be buried here."

Soon after that she showed them to their room. Michael slept restlessly, awakened occasionally by Segar's snoring. Finally, when the first light of dawn slipped into the guest room, he got out of bed and opened the drapes to gaze down at the Garden of the Apostles.

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At one of its intersecting paths the body of the Gypsy with the red kerchief was sprawled face down on the graveled earth. There was a knife in the center of his back, and from above it appeared that he'd been dragged to the spot and pinned there by some giant hand.

Michael and Segar, whom Michael awakened hastily from his morning dreams, were unable to find their hosts in the upstairs bedrooms. They finally located Ida Sibiu in the kitchen, where she was just beginning to prepare breakfast. "A body?" she repeated, unbelieving. "In the garden?"

Michael assured her it was true. "It appears to be one of the Gypsies. Is your husband about?"

"He's bathing now. I'll go look with you."

She followed them through the house and out the front door, hanging back a bit when they reached the garden. "It's Erik," she said, apparently recognizing the red kerchief.

"He's dead," Segar confirmed, kneeling by the body. "I'd better use your telephone to call Bucharest. The local authorities aren't equipped to handle this."

"Who could have done it?" Ida asked.

"The other Gypsy?" Segar suggested.

"His name is Bedrich," she volunteered. "They were camped at the back of our property with at least one woman."

"I'll go," Michael decided suddenly, because there was no one else to do it. "If this Bedrich did it he'll be on the run and I can track him."

Segar didn't argue. He'd known Michael Vlado too long for that. "All right, go. You'd better tell your husband what's happened, Mrs. Sibiu, while I phone the authorities."

She pointed the way for Michael and he set off, unarmed, hardly realizing that he'd been out of bed for only twenty minutes. The morning dew lay thick on the grass as he circled the big house and set off toward the rear of the property. He didn't know what he might be facing—a murderer, perhaps, but more likely an abandoned campsite with embers from a fire still glowing in the daylight. If there was only one woman they had probably fought over her. There were no rules in a knife fight, except it would be rare to stab a fellow Gypsy in the back whatever the provocation.

He saw the tent then, a little thing nestled among the firs. Had they left so quickly that the tent had been sacrificed? Not too likely.

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He was almost to it when the woman emerged carrying a bucket of morning wash water which she emptied on the ground. She saw him then and was startled. "Bedrich!" she called out.

The second Gypsy emerged, bare-chested, from the tent. He was tall and well-built, with olive skin and a square jaw. "What do you want here?" he asked, speaking in Romany.

They both seemed surprised when Michael replied in the Gypsy language. "Your friend Erik is dead. I have come to ask you about that."

They exchanged glances but he saw no surprise. "The fool was looking for trouble," the woman said. She was dark and pretty in the way that very young women sometimes are, before age plays its tricks.

"Did you kill him?" Michael asked.

"He was my brother," the woman answered. "Erik. I am Esmeralda. Those people at the house killed him because he came searching for their treasure."

Michael turned to the Gypsy named Bedrich, who asked simply, "How did he die?"

"Stabbed in the back, near the center of the Garden of the Apostles."

"We worked for them, for Sibiu and his wife," Bedrich said. "Then she said we stole tools and they ordered us off the property."

"But you are still here."

The man shrugged. "Erik did not want to leave without the treasure. He heard them talking about it. He knew it was somewhere in the garden."

"This was the statue of Cynthia?"

"Yes."

"A goddess?"

It was Esmeralda who answered, possibly because of her Greek name. "Cynthia is Artemis, the Greek goddess of the hunt, the counterpart to the Roman goddess Diana." She closed her eyes for a moment and then opened them. "I must see my brother's body. Take me to him."

Michael nodded. He could understand the need. When Bedrich followed along too he said nothing. Back at the big house Claus Sibiu had replaced his wife in the garden with Segar. "This is a shock to Ida," he said. "She must rest before she joins us." He looked uncertainly at the Gypsy couple. "So you found them!"

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"They were at their camp. They had not run away. Esmeralda is the dead man's sister."

Sibiu frowned. "Why did I never know that?"

She looked away, avoiding his face. "Because you never asked. We were only workers to be accused by your wife when something was missing." The words came from Bedrich, not her, but either might have spoken them.

She saw the body then, only half covered by a burlap sack, and went to it. The knife was still buried in his back and she touched it gently, as if about to pull it free. Then her fingers dropped away and she began to sob quietly, showing real emotion for the first time since Michael brought her the news of her brother's death.

"What about the authorities?" he asked Segar.

"No good news. There are disturbances in the streets of Bucharest. Nothing too serious but all police are on standby. It will be at least tomorrow before they can send someone up here. In the meantime, they quickly point out, I am a former investigative officer for the militia. I am to take charge and conduct my own investigation."

Michael could see he was unhappy with the prospect. "There must be local authorities in this area."

"No one qualified to investigate a murder, I fear. Help in such cases is usually summoned from the cities." He glanced toward the Gypsy Bedrich, who had not joined Esmeralda at her brother's body. "I might as well start with you."

The young Gypsy seemed frightened by the turn of events. "We never stole the tools!" he insisted. "We never killed anybody!"

Claus Sibiu glanced at the watch on his left wrist. "Will you be needing me for the next half-hour, Mr. Segar? I have some phone calls to make. And I want to see how my wife is doing."

"Go ahead."

Esmeralda had returned to Michael's side. "You are a Gypsy too," she said.

"Yes, from Gravita, up in the foothills."

"We must have the body for a traditional burial ceremony. You understand that."

"Of course. Segar will have a few questions first. Tell me about the knife. Did it belong to your brother?"

"It was his."

"Did he always have such dirty hands?"

"What do you mean?"

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Michael walked over and indicated the dead man's hands. "There's dirt on them, and under the fingernails too, as if he'd been digging."

"In one of the gardens?"

"Where else? Your brother was after the so-called treasure, wasn't he? His body lies between the gardens of Judas and Jude, at the very center of the layout."

"No Judas," Esmeralda said simply. "He betrayed Christ. He is never honored with the Apostles."

"But there are twelve gardens. You can see that."

"Judas was replaced. The Apostles drew lots for a replacement after he hanged himself."

"There is no marking on any of these gardens," Michael admitted. "I was told they were alphabetical. What was the name of his replacement?"

"I do not remember. It has been years since I studied the Bible with my mother."

Segar had finished questioning the Gypsy Bedrich. "You both must remain on the property until tomorrow," he ordered. "The other police will be arriving then, and may have more questions for you. I will go back to your tent now and look through it. You say you found no statue of Cynthia, but I must be certain it is not among your possessions."

Michael was in the house with Sibiu when he returned. Nothing had been found in or around the Gypsy camp. "Are you sure?" Sibiu asked.

Segar smiled slightly. "My old friend Michael has taught me all the Gypsy tricks. I even kicked away the remains of the campfire and dug underneath it. There was no treasure. Erik did not find it before he was killed."

"Then it's still out there," Michael said. "The statue of Cynthia."

"I'm more disturbed about the killing right now," Sibiu told them in his measured tones. "The government could use this as an excuse for not letting us open the garden."

"Something must be done with the body until tomorrow," Segar told the man. "Do you have any sort of cold storage room in the house?"

There was nothing except a large freezer, and they decided that was too small. The body was wrapped in a plastic bag and carried to the cool basement. Then they set about the problem at hand.

"The statue is out there," Segar stated firmly. "I say everything gets dug up until we find it."

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"How will that help us identify the killer?" Michael asked.

"Erik was killed because he guessed or deduced where the statue was buried. If he did it, we can do it."

"You forget he'd camped on the estate for a year or more," Sibiu told them. "He might have seen something."

"According to your father's note the statue was buried over forty years ago, long before Erik was born. Since you and Ida don't know where it is, what could he have seen? Did either of you ever mention your father's message to him?"

"We might have," Sibiu admitted. "That part about the last Apostle."

"Yes, the last Apostle. It didn't mean Judas but the Apostle who replaced Judas. That's where you'll find the statue."

"We looked there!" Claus Sibiu insisted. "We dug it up and the Gypsies helped. The Apostle chosen to replace Judas was Matthias."

"When you say you looked there you mean you looked in the garden assigned to Judas. Don't you see? There never was a Judas garden. He was one of the original twelve, certainly, but he is never honored with the other Apostles. You were too young to remember it, but the twelfth garden was Matthias's from the beginning. It was never the sixth plot, where you dug, but the eighth plot, in proper alphabetical order between Matthew and Peter."

Segar had drawn twelve squares on a sheet of paper, arranged in three rows of four each and labeled as they appeared from the house. "You mean the right-hand plot in the second row?"

"Exactly," Michael replied.

"But Erik wasn't killed there," Sibiu reminded them.

"The killer dragged the body to the middle, to keep it away from Matthias's plot. From the upstairs window I could detect signs of dragging on the gravel. But there's stronger evidence that Matthias is the garden we want. You told us, Claus, that you left here as a child in the summer of nineteen forty-nine, and your father's message says you've been gone two weeks. So the date on the envelope, February twenty-fourth, is not when the letter was written. What does it refer to? I found it in one of your library books last night—the feast of Saint Matthias! That was before I even realized he was the last Apostle."

"Let's get shovels and start digging," Segar suggested.

They went out the front door with Michael leading the way. He paused at the right end of the second row, as seen from the house. The plot for Matthias, even though it was unmarked. Segar returned

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with two shovels and he and Michael plunged them into the dry earth.

Claus gave a sigh. "Ida won't like what you're doing to her garden."

Michael avoided the well-established tulip bed and the carpet of lilies of the valley. Instead he went to work on a patch of disturbed soil, turned over since the last rain. He'd dug down only two feet before he hit something. "This may be it," he told them. "It's a large plastic bag. Hand me your knife, Mr. Sibiu."

The man slipped the blade from his belt and passed it over. Michael made a clean slit and pulled the edges of the plastic apart.

Something is wrong, he suddenly realized even as he was doing it. *They didn't have plastic bags like this back in the forties.*

Then he saw the body, and the dead face staring up at him was the face of Claus Sibiu, the man who stood behind him at that moment.

Segar gasped at the sight of the uncovered face. "This is madness! Sibiu, is that a twin?"

"There are forces at work here you cannot imagine," Sibiu told them. "Come into the house with me and I will explain everything."

"The body is fresh," Michael pointed out. "He hasn't been dead more than a few days, if that long."

"Come into the house," Sibiu repeated.

"No, I think not," Michael replied. He was beginning to see it all. He was beginning to see too much.

Sibiu's hand came out of his pocket holding a double-barreled derringer pistol, but Michael still held the knife in his hand. He rolled to one side as Sibiu fired, and hurled the knife with an aim he knew was true. It buried itself in the fleshy part of Sibiu's arm, bringing a high-pitched yelp of pain.

Then Michael and Segar were both on him, holding him as Michael peeled away the fringe beard and the false headpiece. "What is this?" Segar demanded.

"It is Ida Sibiu," Michael explained, holding her tightly as he pulled the knife from her arm. "She has murdered her husband and buried him in the garden of Matthias, in place of the moon."

"Moon? What moon?"

"Let me go!" she screeched in a fury, ignoring her arm wound as she wrestled with Michael.

But he held her firm as he answered Segar's question. "The golden

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moon that hangs on the wall of their house. No one else ever said the treasure was a statue. The message from Claus's father described it as a likeness of Cynthia. I finally remembered that Cynthia is also a poetic term for the moon. You and your husband discovered the hiding place in the garden of Matthias a few days ago. Once it was dug up, you didn't need the pretense anymore. You killed Claus and buried him where the moon had been, then hid the treasure in plain sight on the wall of your house."

"Why would she kill him," Segar asked, "when she knew I was coming to see him?"

"That's just the point. She didn't know."

Segar had produced a pair of handcuffs from the trunk of his car and they bandaged Ida Sibiu's arm wound as best they could before driving to the hospital in a nearby town. "I don't understand any of it," Segar admitted as they waited at the hospital for her wound to be treated and stitched up. "Why would she kill her husband?"

"You'll have to ask her that. She met him in Greece, away from home, and I imagine when they were married seven years ago he filled her mind with visions of great wealth back here in Romania. Then the government collapsed and she got an unexpected look at all the wealth—a decaying mansion and a garden gone to seed. Perhaps she would have left him then if the message from his father hadn't come to light, with its promise of buried treasure. So she stayed on, but when Claus phoned you for help with the puzzle last week he neglected to tell her, probably wanting your arrival kept secret until he knew if you could help."

"So we walked in on her yesterday unannounced?"

"Exactly." Michael watched a nurse helping an old man negotiate the corridor. "In retrospect we have to say she kept her composure very well. You already knew about the statue and the message so she had to show it to us, hoping it wouldn't lead us to the body. As for the disguise, she may have had it ready in case local officials called. Remember, she told us they'd used disguises to slip across borders. All she really needed were the fringe beard for her chin, the wig to make the hair appear thin in front, and some of his clothes. We saw from that picture that they were about the same height, and her face was like his in a sisterly way. She was big-boned, but still a bit thinner than he appeared in the photo. As for the voice, she spoke slowly, in a measured manner, careful to give it a masculine tone. She felt safe because you'd met them only once,

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and that time at a reception with others present. The rest was easy. We never saw them together and never suspected at first that the wall plaque in plain sight was the buried treasure."

"What about the Gypsies? They knew the Sibius."

"But Esmeralda avoided looking directly at Claus when she came to view her brother's body. He was dressed right and neither of them had reason to doubt his identity."

"You see it all in retrospect," Segar challenged. "Admit it—you were as surprised as I was when we uncovered Claus Sibiu's body!"

"I was surprised," Michael admitted, "but I shouldn't have been. Yesterday Claus wore his watch on his right wrist. This morning it was on his left. Why the change overnight?"

"I didn't notice that," Segar admitted. "Why?"

"Because Ida cut herself while slicing the meat last night—remember? She couldn't risk our noticing the same cut on Claus's wrist so she covered it with the watchband."

Segar nodded finally, beginning to accept it. "After she killed him and buried the body, why didn't she just take that moon plaque and leave?"

"Because Erik the Gypsy was still around, searching for the treasure. Last night, when he started digging with his hands in the garden of Matthias, she stabbed him in the back with his own knife."

Michael Vlado had an answer for everything, except why a woman would kill her husband for a golden plaque that didn't look very much like the moon at all.

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EQMM frequently gets letters from longtime subscribers. When our readers turn out also to be aspiring writers, it's especially gratifying to be able to publish their work. Such is the case with Kathleen Grover, who has been reading EQMM for thirty years and has aspired to have her own work in the magazine since junior high school . . .

TRAPS

by KATHLEEN A. GROVER

Mirotin eyed Evelyn's dark congested face with distaste. Alive, she had been passably pretty. Light brown hair, downy as a baby's, framed her small round face. Her large golden brown eyes had glowed with happiness, an event rarer and rarer as time went on, but dammit, that wasn't Mirotin's fault.

Brilliant, cautious, lucky Mirotin. For twenty-three years he had had two selves. His winter self was drab, dreary, colorless. The Winter Mirotin taught school at an undistinguished private academy where mediocre students' parents paid fabulous tuitions to keep their sons from mingling on a daily basis with children of other races, sex, or economic aspirations. Mirotin despised the school, the students, their parents, his fellow staff members, and his entire winter existence with impartial fervor. The academy was a painful necessity. The tedious laboring ant's existence that supported the gaudy grasshopper who was his summer self.

Each year on the Friday after Memorial Day, Mirotin closed the door on the screaming, totally undisciplined pack of future real-estate developers and divorce lawyers. Joyously they fled his classroom, not to return until the Tuesday following Labor Day.

Mirotin would dust the last clinging bits of chalk from his fingers, gather up his heavy briefcase stuffed with textbook prospectuses

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and improving summer reading, make one final check of the classroom door, and drive smugly away in his boxy little car.

When he arrived at home, the first thing Mirotin did was to fling the heavy briefcase to the back of his hall closet, where it would lie undisturbed until at least the middle of August. Then he would strip off his suit jacket and pants and hang them on a hook in the bathroom. Mrs. Grubb, the quiet, sad-eyed Hispanic woman who cleaned for him twice a week, would take them to the cleaners and later pick them up and hang them in the closet with all the other slumbering winter clothing abandoned until Labor Day.

Mirotin would occasionally be home for three or four days at a stretch, but then it would be time for the next trip. A sleepless, glittering weekend in a casino hotel. A lazy country week at a small bed and breakfast. Fishing the Canadian wilderness. Diving to photograph a Caribbean reef.

Always there was a lovely lady at his side those divine drifting summers. Twenty-three ladies stretching back twenty-three years to when Mirotin was but a bashful lad of nineteen.

Blue-eyed Mollie waving from the ramparts of the fort at St. Augustine. Shy Jill half turned away from the camera at the Statue of Liberty. Sassy Charlene making a face from the observation deck below Mount Rushmore.

Mirotin taught American History and the slides he took during his summer treks around the country were used to enliven and illustrate his class lectures. The students enjoyed Mirotin's slide shows because the darkened classroom offered opportunities for napping and skullduggery. Also, the colorful slides were at least more entertaining than Mirotin's swift, dry, fact-studded lectures.

Mirotin enjoyed the slides very much himself.

Click. "This, students, is the oldest fort in the continental United States. It is called St. Augustine and was built by the Spanish . . ." Sometimes Mirotin was sorely tempted to continue his travelogue thus: "And this, students, is Mollie Kazluzko, a junior-high-school Spanish teacher from Minnesota or Michigan or one of those damned M states in the middle! Pretty Mollie, such a tease in those tight blue shorts. I don't think they ever found pretty Mollie, class. Most men would have put what was left of her in the Atlantic and trusted the tide to carry her away, but I took her inland to the swamps. A lot of tidy predators in a swamp, class."

Twenty-three summers, twenty-three ladies. He never planned in advance which trip it would be, although he tended to make it one

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of the later ones because otherwise a good deal of his summer would be anticlimactic.

Twenty-three summers. Fourteen years ago the FBI had detected what they believed was a pattern involving three to five similar homicides. The serial killer was known to them as the Resort Romeo and was believed to be still at large and active. Mirotin, of course, had never heard the name Resort Romeo and would have been quick to find fault with it if he had. Romeo, he would have explained, had been an adolescent hopelessly besotted with women, whereas he, Mirotin, was a man of mature years who loathed women with every cell in his body.

From earliest childhood Mirotin had been aware that women were extremely dangerous. His own father had had his education cut short and his prospects and dreams destroyed because he had allowed himself to be trapped by Mirotin's pregnant mother. The result of the pregnancy had been Mirotin's elder sister Carmen, who in her turn had trapped herself a husband when she was scarcely out of high school. That her young husband had later fled, leaving Carmen to raise two young daughters alone, was only justice in Mirotin's eyes. He was sure his young nieces were well on their way to becoming heartless, fertile predators in their turn. Regrettable, but inevitable.

Brooding on all this fearful fertility he felt that one summer soon, perhaps the one coming in less than three months, he would have to extend himself to two, would have to give himself that added pleasure. Double your pleasure, double your fun, as the old commercial went.

But that was not the problem. No, the problem was wretched Evelyn. There she lay with her neck wrung like a chicken's and her horrid puffy blue face turned imploringly up to Mirotin. Weak, passive Evelyn. Too frightened or insecure to protest Mirotin's vagabond summers, Evelyn had tended to Mirotin's infrequent and dispassionate winter needs for three years running. A little home cooking, conversation with a woman who was at least sufficiently educated to comprehend some of his opinions, and occasionally some quick, clean, discreet sex. Had it been so damned much to ask?

Apparently it had. Three years with no swelling, no queasiness, no terrifying latenesses, and now the stupid woman had suddenly, inexplicably become pregnant. Any man would have understood Mirotin's reaction. She had dropped her horrid bombshell just as he had begun the ritualistic removal of her clothing that passed for

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foreplay in their relationship. Before he could even really begin to assimilate it, the deed was done, and poor, trusting, gravid Evelyn was irrevocably dead.

And Lester Mirotin, twenty-three-time successful murderer of strange women in exotic places, was alone in his apartment in his landlocked Midwestern hometown in the middle of March with the pregnant body of his co-worker and known lover.

Irritably, he flipped the corner of the sheet over Evelyn's reproachful face and began to pace the floor. He had never planned to murder anyone in his hometown, never ever would have done so intentionally. There were no convenient swamps here, no oceans, no woods. Hundreds of miles of well-tended, frequently inspected farmland stretched around the busy little city in all directions.

Some of Mirotin's previous victims had been meant to be found, had been left in obvious places or posed in positions to suggest that Mirotin was leaving some sort of message or clue for the police. He couldn't do that with Evelyn, he didn't dare. He knew that the odds were excellent that several of his kills had been connected. In all probability, the national task force on serial killers was aware of his existence and was in some stage of an investigation ultimately aimed at capturing him. Mirotin shuddered.

Evelyn alive would have made him a joke among their colleagues forevermore. He could imagine what they'd say. "Poor old Mirotin, finally had to get married! Got himself trapped by little Nurse Andrews. Baby came just six months after the wedding. Fine little boy. Always thought he looked a little like Coach Mayhew when he got older, though." No, that had been unthinkable.

Evelyn dead, however, was even more dangerous. Even in the heat of summer, his hometown was no tourist attraction, unless one had relatives there. If her body were found anywhere near the city and there was even one tiny bit of physical evidence that linked her to his other kills, the FBI investigation would focus on that area. Mirotin, perpetual traveler and proud of it, would either be captured or forced to flee for his life. He could picture himself having to seek out an expatriate existence in some wretched Third World country.

Mirotin paced unhappily on. There had to be a way.

Mirotin froze, mouth slightly open to help catch the smallest sound in the raw, damp cold of the early spring night. A persistent drizzle had been falling for hours and the soft pattering sound of the drops striking the ground tore at his tautly stretched nerves. An occa-

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sional car zipped along the wet pavement on the main street that ran past the front gates nearly three city blocks away. The narrow winding roads surrounding Mirotin were seldom heavily trafficked even during the day. A maintenance truck had passed his position nearly twenty minutes before, creating two blinding points of light in the chilly darkness. Mirotin surmised that it had been driven by a solitary night watchman. He did not think anyone else would come anywhere near him until after daylight, a safe four hours away at this time of year.

An unhappy Mirotin duck-walked out from behind the small clump of bushes. Lowering himself to his knees again, he crept cautiously forward, delicately feeling the damp ground before him. The darkness was nearly complete. It was only two days past the new moon and the heavily overcast sky muffled any helpful stars that might have looked down upon his efforts.

At long last the tips of his fingers brushed the edge of the canvas tarp. Carefully, nearly soundlessly, he expelled the air that fear and frustration had trapped in his throat. He was not a superstitious man and aside from the planning and executing of his summer diversions, he really did not possess much imagination. It had cost him an endless, sleepless night to devise a secure place to conceal Evelyn's remains. When the solution had finally occurred to Mirotin he had unflinchingly accepted it and immediately turned his mind to the problems of storage and transportation. It had not caused him a moment's fear or distress that he was going to bury his former lover in the dead of night in the bottom of a cemetery grave already dug for an early-morning funeral service.

Getting into the cemetery had been much more difficult than he had anticipated. The grounds were surrounded by the traditional high wrought-iron fence on three sides. On the fourth side, a wire fence was strung. Mirotin had thought it would be quite simple to get over, but he had been sadly mistaken.

At six feet, the fence was a scant four inches taller than Mirotin himself, but the wire was of a fairly thick gauge woven into a mesh of squares only two inches wide. Much too narrow to accommodate a foot, and much too sturdy to be easily bent. He was completely unable to get over or through it.

Finally, in an absolute frenzy of frustration, Mirotin had seized an old piece of lumber abandoned on the ground and dug his way under the fence. Once he was safely through himself, he had had to

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wrestle Evelyn's body along the small trench. It had really been very unpleasant.

When he had finally located the drinking fountain that was roughly twenty paces behind the grave whose excavation-in-progress he had observed that afternoon, he had waited half an hour, uncertainly, until the maintenance truck passed. Another twenty minutes had been spent creeping cautiously forward, afraid to use the small dim flashlight he had brought until he was actually under the cover of the tarp.

He had undertaken the entire creepy post-midnight journey with his late mistress wrapped in the sheets her bodily fluids had soiled, tied to his back, shoulders, and waist. He was unenthusiastically aware that he was going to have to spend some time under the canvas, quite possibly in standing water in the bottom of a freshly dug grave, deepening a trench on one side in which to place Evelyn's awkward corpse. But with every little sound causing his stomach to flutter queasily, it was a relief when his fingers touched the canvas of the tarp.

Mirotin sighed and wiped the sweat from his forehead and the back of his neck, lightly rapping the top of Evelyn's bowed head as he did so. He smiled to himself, a dried-up little grimace of academic amusement, and murmured that it would be a great relief to finally get Evelyn off his back! Slight in both height and weight in life, Evelyn had become a sodden and distressingly solid burden in death.

Gently making a tent shape out of a small section of the tarp, Mirotin thrust the little flashlight under it and slid the switch up. Craning his neck forward, his eyes tried to follow the path of the small, dim beam of light. Carefully peeling back more of the canvas, Mirotin leaned a little farther forward. Suddenly his right knee pressed painfully into the sharp edge of a rock. Mirotin murmured an obscenity and shifted his weight. Evelyn, securely lashed to him in three different places, shifted also, and it was her additional weight that caused him to lose his balance and unceremoniously pitch headfirst into the grave.

With a small sharp splash, Mirotin landed on his face at the bottom of the flooding hole. Immediately after the splash, he felt a swift savage pain shoot up his back. His body went limp of its own accord and settled quickly into the freezing liquid mud.

Mirotin's headlong plunge had shifted Evelyn's weight. Her incredibly heavy head bore down on the back of his skull, relentlessly pressing his face deeper into the cold viscous mud.

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Mirotin's roar of fury was considerably muffled by the thick wad of mud that his collision with the bottom of the grave had thrust deep into his throat. His nose too was badly clogged by the soaking clay that packed his nostrils.

Angrily, Mirotin tried to buck Evelyn's crushing weight off his shoulders, but his body refused to respond. The quick sharp pain he had felt upon hitting the ground was his back breaking, and none of his body below the twelfth vertebra was ever going to receive a message from his brain again. His arms were splayed at his sides, already nearly buried in the slick liquid mud. They flailed ineffectually, unable to get the purchase needed to leverage his body up.

In the new grave dug twenty paces from the drinking fountain, the water rose steadily from the continuous rain. The strange bulky shape of the living man with the dead woman on his back writhed less and less frequently and finally ceased to move altogether.

Mirotin, the bane of every American History student at Briarwood Academy and the Resort Romeo, scourge of the special task force that had unsuccessfully sought him for over a decade, expelled his last breath and settled to eternal rest, trapped at last under the chilly burden of loyal, persistent Evelyn.

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Richard Forrest is the author of a number of mystery novels, including the Lyon Wentworth series published by St. Martin's Press. In 1982, his story "The Headmaster Helps One of His Boys" was published in EQMM. *His return appearance is a clever tale of justice served . . .*

A VERY SMALL RASHER

by RICHARD FORREST

All things considered, I might have finished my days at Nutmeg Village in relative calm if it hadn't been for the killing of Po.

Until that event, I had viewed my admission into the village as financial salvation. A very large investment in some very bad junk bonds had devastated my portfolio. The fees charged by the low-cost senior citizen housing project fit nicely with my present limited finances. They took twenty-five percent of my total social security check for the bright, three-room apartment, and that also included heat, water, and trash removal. The complex was composed of fifty garden-style units built around a center green. This square had a gazebo, benches, two picnic tables, and a well-tended lawn.

The grounds upkeep and other maintenance chores were performed by Skee Wingate, who also acted as resident manager. I soon learned that Skee had unilaterally added headkeeper and resident nemesis to his ordinary job description.

I had my first run-in with our stalag commandant two days after I finally topped the waiting list and was invited to move to Nutmeg Village. We collided in the center of the green like two mountain rams locking horns over a herd of females. Our resident manager was bent over a large mower with a heavy wrench clenched in his oversize fist. He whacked the side of the machine repeatedly, as if sheer physical force could correct any mechanical defects. His pounding instantly stopped when he saw Po. He slowly turned to glare at us. His mouth fell open in astonishment.

"What in the hell is that?" His large right hand, topped by a series of fat fingers, pointed at Po, who squatted happily at the end of his leash.

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"Let me introduce Po," I said with a smile. I expected the questions and kind comments that my pet usually engendered.

"It's a damn animal!" Skee sputtered. His rage was barely controlled.

"The resident's handbook says pets are allowed," I retorted. It was quite apparent that there was Po trouble lurking on this horizon.

"Within reason," Skee said. "That thing you've got is ridiculous."

"The manual specifically says each resident is allowed to have one pet, not to exceed thirty pounds in weight."

"I want that damn thing out of here! And I mean today. Understood?" Without waiting for an answer he turned and strode toward his small office located in the end building.

Po nuzzled my left foot for an ear scratching, but I couldn't turn my attention from Skee Wingate as he angrily stalked across the grounds. His progress was punctuated by sound as he kicked the trash can at the edge of the green. "I'm sure you aren't more than twenty pounds, Po, and that's within the limits. But I have a feeling we're going to have to prove it." I gave a gentle tug on the leash and we started back toward our unit. "You know what gets me?" I said speaking aloud to my pet, as I often did. "Their list of rules says one small pet, but for all they know, I could have a twenty-pound hooded cobra that would fit the rule. Sometimes I wish you were a viper, Po. It might make things a little easier. At least then I'd only have to feed you once every week or two."

When you've lived as long as I have, you manage to acquire a little knowledge concerning basic human psychology and the general meanness level of some individuals. I instinctively knew Skee Wingate was really up there in the meanness category. I didn't know or care why, I only knew that he could make my life in Nutmeg Village difficult. Such battles have to be joined quickly, so I made my preparations that very afternoon for our early confrontation.

The next morning when we entered the manager's office, I found Skee with his feet propped on the battered desk. He popped the top of the day's second or third can of beer. He grimaced at us disdainfully, drank the beer in one long gulp, and slowly crushed the can with one hand before dropping it into the wastebasket by his side. "Get that filthy animal out of here!" was his greeting.

"Po is remarkably clean, housebroken, and leash trained."

"He is also history at Nutmeg Village."

"No way, Jose," I answered. Po oinked in response.

"That's a damn pig!" Skee bellowed at me.

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"Damn tootin!" I agreed. "One hell of a pig!"

"He'll grow up to be a hog."

"He is full grown. He is a miniature pig."

Po oinked in agreement.

"Listen, wise guy. We have rules at Nutmeg, and pigs are not included."

"My pet is bright, clean, relatively quiet, and all around great to be around. He also weighs under thirty pounds." I plunked the baby scale I had wheeled over in my shopping cart onto the desk and gently lifted an oinking Po into the basket. He tipped the scale at twenty-three pounds. "It's going to be weight-watchers mash in the old trough tonight, Po," I said. "Seven more pounds and you're . . ."

"Small bacon," Skee finished for me. "Okay, the little ham meets the weight requirements, but there are town ordinances that got to be followed."

"Like what?" I asked, alarmed that this guy had done some homework concerning the problem.

"No farm animals are allowed to be raised within the city limits. Pigs are farm animals. Get it? Take him to the Italian sausage guy around the corner. He might give you a buck a pound for the little runt."

Po oinked twice in anger at this possibility as I recoiled in horror at the suggestion.

"You read me, mister?" Skee looked me directly in the eyes and I saw intent without pity residing there. "If I see that animal around here again, I want him to be in links or chops."

The downward slant of his snout indicated Po's dejection, and mine, as we left the office and walked slowly back to our unit. The battle to keep Po away from my friendly sausage maker was fraught with difficulties. My admission to the retirement village was provisional and stipulated a thirty-day tryout period. During that time, the housing agency could ask me to leave if they received complaints. In addition to that danger, I was sure I would be facing Skee Wingate's daily harassment. He could make a lot of life's small but important details awfully difficult. I was certain my hot water would run cold, the life expectancy of any light bulbs in my vicinity would shrink, and my heating unit would mysteriously malfunction. He would have valid-sounding excuses for all these mishaps. In addition to those problems, I might have to fight off eviction if he made a report to the housing agency. The future had suddenly turned a little grim.

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I looked down at Po. "Damn it, pig, we're in this together to the very end. We'll fight on."

I received a double oink in response, which I took to be affirmative.

We found a note stuck in our door when we arrived back at the unit.

"Dear New Resident," it read. "Please come to unit ten for tea at four." It was signed, "Hattie Grimshaw."

The note continued. "P.S. Please bring your cute little doggie." Whoever Mrs. Grimshaw was, she evidently had a vision problem.

Since I couldn't afford cable for my TV, and the ears only brought in two snowy stations which broadcast shopping clubs, Po and I decided at four to go next door and introduce ourselves.

Hattie Grimshaw was one of those older ladies who simply stopped ageing during a particularly good year in their seventies. This gave her a well-preserved quality enhanced by fastidious grooming and courtly manners inherited from another era. As she busied herself with the formal tea service placed on the low table between us, she quickly informed me that she was a widowed former schoolteacher who thought my little dog was truly "cunning."

"What kind is he?" she asked.

"Po is a Vietnamese miniature," I replied.

"Remarkable. He looks quite a bit like a pig."

At that point Po oinked.

"And that bark," Mrs. Grimshaw said as she poured tea into the dainty bone-china cups. "Isn't it amazing what they can do these days with genetic engineering?"

"You know what they say?" I answered. "If they have little squiggly tails and oink, they must be ducks."

She laughed. "Before he left, Mr. Grimshaw always liked a little dollop in his tea."

I knew that Mr. Grimshaw hadn't just departed for the supermarket, but I thought I'd try the dollop anyway. "That would be just fine."

Hattie Grimshaw poured a hefty slurp of good sipping bourbon into my tea. The afternoon was beginning to look up. "How kind of you," I said. "Are you acquainted with Mr. Wingate, our resident manager?"

She sighed and sipped more tea before replying. "I am afraid that I had the misfortune during my teaching career to have Skee Wingate in my sixth-grade class. In those days we called children

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like him rotten troublemakers. Now, I think they refer to them as dysfunctional individuals impeded by learning disabilities. That rotten kid nearly drove me out of teaching. When I found out that he was coming to work here, I nearly started putting dollops in my tea."

"He must have been a remarkable kid for you to remember him from a couple of semesters all those years ago."

"Oh no. Not one year. He had three years to work on me. We could never get him past the sixth grade until I threatened to resign. I'll always remember how he sat in the back of my social-studies class and pulled the wings off flies. I understand that he progressed to larger animals during math in junior high. Skee never did like his numbers."

"We had a run-in out on the green yesterday. He made quite a fuss over Po and insists that I get rid of him."

Hattie Grimshaw shook her head sadly. "And best you should. If you don't, something terrible will happen and the poor little thing will suffer."

"The resident's handbook says we're allowed a small pet."

The old teacher slowly shook her head again. "Oh yes, quite so. That is, if the pet does not annoy Mr. Wingate. If he takes it into his head to dislike a resident, or his pet . . . well, it brings back those years when he sat in the back of my class during social studies and did things to insects."

"Are you trying to tell me that Skee Wingate kills residents' pets?"

"He arranges animal accidents."

Po oinked contentedly at my feet and I looked down at my beloved pig in terror. "That's obscene," I said quietly, referring to pet euthanasia.

"Oh, quite so," Hattie replied, "but nevertheless true. My own Thomas Cat was dispatched with a snowplow blade. Mrs. Corky in unit twelve never could find her parrot, although we did discover some tail feathers around the woodchipper."

"He just murders your pets in cold blood?" I exclaimed in horror.

"Oh, no," Mrs. Grimshaw said sweetly as she poured more tea and added another healthy swig of bourbon in mine. "I thought I explained that they are always accidents. The snowplow blade just happened to fall when my Tom's neck was under it. Tweety bird stupidly flew into the woodchipper. Mr. Porgland's puppy became too excited and ran too close to the delivery truck. Skee always has

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an explanation, although I'm not sure he expects or really wants you to believe it."

"Then he won't report me to the housing agency?"

"Probably not," Mrs. Grimshaw said as she smiled sadly at me over the rim of her teacup. "Skee is extremely self-reliant in these matters. He very much likes to handle small details like animal removals or evictions in his own manner."

"In other words, he'll make my life miserable?"

"Until he arranges an accident for your cunning little doggie."

I went back to my apartment, fed Po, and sat glumly staring out the screen door and across the vacant green. It was a quiet night and the other residents were inside eating or watching the early television shows. This quiet calm gave the retirement village a peaceful, nearly idyllic appearance. What a pity that a bully like Skee Wingate had invaded this small enclave to force his sadistic will on those decades older than himself.

I finally fell into a fitful sleep filled with dreams of small happy pigs jumping high fences. I awoke to an early sun streaming through the bedroom window and the sound of a large sitdown mower growling across the green. I expected the usual impatient breakfast oinks, because Po was always most anxious about the day's first meal.

The small apartment was ominously quiet except for the sound of the distant mower.

A screech shattered the morning. I instantly knew that it was my pig's cry of anguish.

I stumbled toward the door. My legs, as they often did these days, refused to function properly. My hand brushed against the screen door, and I saw that the catch had somehow become unlatched to allow the door to stand open a few inches. I hobbled through the entrance and across the green toward Skee Wingate seated on his mower chomping on an unlit cigar.

"For God's sake, stop that damn machine!" I yelled.

Skee looked disdainfully in my direction and then throttled back on the mower until it choked out and rolled to a stop. "I got no time for your complaints, Mr. New Resident. Today is mowing day come hell or high water."

"I heard my pig out here."

"We don't keep pigs at Nutmeg Village. Couldn't be pigs you heard, because pigs aren't allowed."

It was then that I saw the remains.

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It was obvious that the mower had run directly over Po. I knelt next to the small body and tentatively ran my hand gently along his tiny snout.

I felt his presence before I saw the ground shadow of Skee Wingate's looming hulk behind me. "Well, lookee there," he said. "I didn't even see that little critter. He must have run right under the mower blades."

My knees creaked as I stood. As I came to a standing position, my balled fist came up from near the ground in a sweeping roundhouse aimed directly at our resident manager's smirking face.

He caught my fist in his huge palm and laughed as he squeezed. The pressure on my hand forced me to sink to my knees before him. He laughed again. "Go back to your hovel, old man. But take that little rasher of bacon with you." He chuckled as he climbed back on the mower and started its engine.

As I walked slowly across the green toward my unit with Po's remains cradled in my arms, the doors of the other apartments opened. Silver-haired and silent men and women stepped out on their front walks to watch my forlorn funeral procession. I felt their compassion for us and their anger toward Wingate as they watched me enter my unit. The screen door swished shut behind us.

I laid him on the table by the window and stood silently before my dead friend while the mower whirred in the distance. I don't know how long I remained there in my grief before I sensed her beside me.

"After it happened to my Thomas," Mrs. Grimshaw said, "I had him done so that I could bring him out at night to keep me company. See how lifelike he is?" She put a large object on the table next to Po's remains.

I forced myself to look at it. Her cat had been reconstructed by a taxidermist and now sat placidly back on his haunches atop my table with his tail perpetually curled over his front paws. "He's very real-looking," I finally managed to say.

"I can telephone the gentleman who did Thomas, if you'd like to have your little dog done."

"Thank you, no," I replied. I forced myself to be civil, while my thoughts were consumed with massive plots of revenge and retribution. The plan came to me in its entirety complete with all details. The simplicity of its execution, its retribution tempered with the possibility of redemption, appealed to my fair nature. I was finally

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able to smile at Mrs. Grimshaw. "Would you be interested in donating Thomas to a most worthy solution?"

She looked thoughtful and wistful as she stroked her stuffed cat. "If the plan were truly worthy of Thomas and concerned Mr. Wingate, I would seriously consider it."

"I'm sure you will find it so," I said. "I have an errand to run, so perhaps you and Thomas will meet me back here at teatime?"

There were in fact two errands to run, both important and somehow related. The first was the more moving and sad. I buried Po in a medium-sized box in the woods near the river. It was quiet there except for the sound of running water and an occasional bird cry. He would have liked the spot and been content to nap under the tree within the small circle of sun that pierced the leaf cover.

I walked the few blocks to town and purchased a box of shotgun shells and detonator caps from a large hardware store. I was concerned that the clerk might give me a questioning glance, since hunting season was months away, but the purchase didn't warrant a second look from him. This convinced me that my purchases would go unnoticed and unreported for the rest of time.

I was home in my unit well before teatime, and spent the remaining hours opening the shotgun shells and pouring their gunpowder into a Campbell's soup can that I had cleaned for that purpose. Mrs. Grimshaw arrived exactly at four with Thomas Cat tucked under one arm and a steaming mug of tea in each hand. These were working cups of strong tea, meant to be consumed by those with true purpose in their actions, not a dainty social tea served in small bone-china cups balanced on one's knee during frivolous conversation. She plunked the tea and Thomas Cat on my table, as if to announce that they were both present and ready for duty.

"Let's do it," she said strongly.

Within the hour Thomas Cat had received a gunpowder stuffing and had his eyes replaced with dynamite caps.

Skee Wingate's pickup was always backed into the manager's office parking space with its nose pointed out. I carefully placed Thomas Cat exactly ten feet in front of the truck's hood ornament. The pickup's oversize tires lifted the cab high enough off the ground to assure adequate clearance for the undercarriage to pass harmlessly over the twice-reconstructed cat.

"I must say this for Skee," Mrs. Grimshaw said. "He's very punctual."

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"I have noticed that," I replied from my lawn chair next to hers in front of our respective units. "He does leave exactly at five, doesn't he?"

"In twenty-five seconds," she said after a glance at the small watch hanging from a neck pendant. "You will give him a final chance, won't you? Even the most recalcitrant bad boy deserves a final chance."

"Of course, I will," I responded in complete honesty.

At that moment, the screen door of the manager's office banged open as Skee strode to his pickup with a six pack of beer hanging from one hand. He slid behind the wheel, popped the top of a beer, and gunned the engine to life. I stood up as he started to release the emergency brake.

I pointed to Thomas Cat still sitting placidly in front of the pickup. "Watch out for that pussycat in front of you," I yelled.

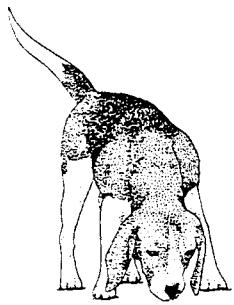
He made some sort of hand gesture in my direction as the truck sprang forward. I could see that I hadn't placed the stuffed animal in a position that suited Skee, so he corrected my error by yanking the wheels to the right in order for a front tire to run squarely over the animal.

The explosion from the stuffed cat was not as powerful as I expected, but it was adequate to ignite the truck's gasoline tank and turn the vehicle into an immediate raging inferno.

Other residents came out on the walk, but after a quick glance toward the resident manager's office, they quickly retreated back inside their units. I had the distinct impression that there was not going to be any rush to phone the fire department.

"Skee never would listen to directions," Mrs. Grimshaw said.

"Appears not," I replied. I vowed to personally phone 911 as soon as I finished my tea, which Hattie Grimshaw had so liberally dolloped with good sipping bourbon.



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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Some of the secondary arts of novel writing are nearly lost today. Few writers, for example, give individual titles to their chapters, the Emma Lathen team being a witty exception.

Not quite as rare but just as praiseworthy are the epigraph gatherers, those patient and meticulous novelists who go to the trouble of providing an appropriate quotation to begin each chapter. The latest novels from two of the best writers of literate traditional mysteries offer particularly effective examples of this practice.

**** Colin Dexter: *The Way Through the Woods,* Crown, $20. The tenth novel about Chief Inspector Morse, which won the Crime Writers Association's Gold Dagger for best novel published in Great Britain in 1992, may be the finest in a distinguished series, as well as being as pure a puzzle mystery as the contemporary market is likely to produce. When a young Swedish woman disappears north of Oxford, clues to her fate are offered in a poem published in the *Times,* whose readers fill its letters column with ingenious speculation. While many fictional detectives, like characters in comic strips, become less grotesque and more conventional as they go along, Morse—lover of music, women, puzzles, and *The Archers;* squeamish in the presence of blood and gore; always quick to let Sergeant Lewis pay for the drinks—seems to grow quirkier. Dexter deserves a special medal for his diligence in finding epigraphs: there are sixty-nine chapters here, plus prologue and epilogue, each headed by a pointed quotation.

*** Barbara Michaels: *Houses of Stone,* Simon and Schuster, $20. Michaels (a.k.a. Elizabeth Peters and Barbara Mertz) doesn't offer as many epigraphs as Dexter—there are fifteen chapters—but they are certainly good ones, all on the theme of the discouragement and ridicule of women's literary aspirations. The plot involves English literature scholar Karen Holloway, who discovers an unpublished feminist gothic novel manuscript and races her scholarly rivals to trace its nineteenth-century author. Assisting her in enthusiastic fashion, often playing Holmes to her Watson, is historian Peggy Finneyfrock. The mystery of how the gothic, transcribed with agonizing slowness, will come out parallels the present-day problem. And this is one romantic mystery where the eternal question of which-male-is-the-good-guy is not that easy to guess.

**** Edward D. Hoch: *The Night My Friend: Stories of Crime and Suspense,* edited by Francis M.

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Nevins, Jr., Ohio University Press, $21.95. I'm late reviewing this 1992 trade paperback collection, but the publishers didn't promote it much, and if anyone deserves to be advised of its existence, it's the readership of *EQMM*. The twenty-two stories were all originally published in the 1960s, and all are non-series. Some provide the kind of pure detective puzzles Hoch offers here monthly, e.g. "Day of the Picnic," a nostalgic piece that in some ways foreshadows the Dr. Sam Hawthorne series; the frequently anthologized locked-room puzzle "The Long Way Down"; the haunting carnival tale "Too Long at the Fair"; and the story that gives the book its fine title, which, ironically, I found the weakest of the lot. Most of the entries though are ironic pure crime stories, including some character studies that would be as much at home in literary quarterlies as in crime fiction magazines. The collection underlines what a versatile and capable writer Hoch is, as if *EQMM* readers needed reminding.

*** Jerome Doolittle: *Head Lock,* Pocket Books, $20. Ex-wrestler Tom Bethany and his creator are solidly in the tradition of Spenser and Robert B. Parker, from the Boston locale to the macho sensitive dialogue and narrative to the disdain, in this case at least, for a complex mystery plot. When Bethany takes lawyer Hope Edwards, with whom he is having an affair only slightly behind the back of her gay husband, for an abortion, he runs up against the pro-life movement at its most militant and masterminds a scam to expose hypocritical televangelist and political candidate Howard Orrin. The story is well-told and involving. Still, even if you share Doolittle's liberal political views, you may wish he had given the other side a bit more credit for sincerity and intellectual honesty. A formidable opponent makes for better fictional conflict. (Another recent pro-choice novel, Howard Fast's *The Trial of Abigail Goodman* <Crown, $20>, has a more severe case of the same problem.)

*** Harold Adams: *A Perfectly Proper Murder,* Walker, $18.95. In Depression-era South Dakota, itinerant sign painter Carl Wilcox once again exercises his crime-solving sideline when Podunkville druggist and alderman Basil Ecke is murdered. If not one of the author's best, it is a reliably solid effort. In his back-of-the-jacket note, editor Michael Seidman says Adams asked him if the very brief Wilcox novels—this one runs a scant 150 pages—should be longer. Their mutual conclusion: "like a person's legs, the books were long enough to do the job they had to do." I wish more publishing people felt that way in this era of overlong mysteries.

** William Harrington: *Columbo: The Grassy Knoll,* TOR, $18.95. I started this book with dueling prejudices. On the one hand, Harrington is one of my favorite writers; Columbo, the durable creation of Richard Levinson and William Link, is certainly my all-time fa-

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vorite TV cop; and I am among those who consider the Kennedy assassination one of the twentieth century's great unsolved murders. On the other hand, I usually avoid novelized versions of TV characters, especially by hands other than the original creators, and fictional riffs on the Kennedy case have been done over and over again. (Does anybody remember Edmund Aubrey's 1980 pastiche *Sherlock Holmes in Dallas?*) The victim is TV talk-show host Paul Drury, who has copious computer files on the assassination and hints at great revelations planned for the thirtieth anniversary of the event. In the Columbo tradition of inverted detection, the reader knows who killed Drury, but the Kennedy angle allows for a whodunit mystery as well. Old pro Harrington depicts the TV sleuth with fidelity and writes and paces his story as smoothly as usual. However, the finale sheds no light on the real-life Kennedy puzzle and the sparring with the three (two too many) killers isn't up to the best Columbo standard.

The latest in Bantam's collectors' series of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe novels is the fine 1938 entry *Too Many Cooks* ($4.99), including a good introduction, more frankly critical than most in its comparisons of Stout with other writers, by Peter Straub. It's disappointing, though, that the accompanying section of recipes, included in Garland's 1976 hardcover reprint, is missing.

Another notable reprint is Bill Pronzini and Collin Wilcox's 1978 collaboration *Twospot* (Carroll & Graf, $4.95), in which the Nameless Detective and San Francisco cop Frank Hastings combine for a strong wine country case.

Economic note: In 1989, I was shocked when Putnam published an omnibus volume of three of Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot novels for the whopping price of $29.95. Now the same firm offers a genuine bargain in a hardcover volume of comparable size and production quality: an omnibus of three Lilian Jackson Braun novels, previously available only as paperback originals, at the "instant remainder" price of $11.98. The three are *The Cat Who Saw Red* (1986), *The Cat Who Played Brahms* (1987), and *The Cat Who Played Post Office* (1987).

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

In addition to being one of the leading contemporary writers of the classic mystery story, Robert Barnard is a scholar of the form. His critical study of Agatha Christie, A Talent to Deceive *(Mysterious Press) pays homage to an author in whose footsteps he follows. But Mr. Barnard has brought to the form something distinctively his own, a liveliness and wit that combines with excellent plotting to provide first-rate entertainment . . .*

IF LOOKS COULD KILL

by ROBERT BARNARD

When Sam and I married everybody said it was a mésalliance. On his part, of course. *His* people stood around eyeing off *my* people at the reception, and they hardly bothered to hide their scorn. My people were not very numerous. There was my mother and Auntie Florrie, both there for the booze. There was my best friend Val and a few girls from work who were hardly more than "friends for the day." And that was about it. I have always preferred to go through life unencumbered.

His people, Sam's, ranged from the comfortably off to the discreetly rich. They were Jewish, though few of them were Orthodox, as over the years they had Englished themselves determinedly. The men wore the right suits for a wedding, the women wore the right dresses, and everyone wore the right expression—that of trying to put the best face on a disaster.

"They're wearing their *Titanic* expressions," I said to Val.

"Snotty-nosed bunch," she said. "What have they to sneer at?"

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"I'm not their class, I'm not their race, and I'm not their religion," I pointed out.

That was it, really. The whole reception consisted of my people trying to get the lion's share of the drinks and eats, and his people making it clear that in marrying me Sam Kopinski had let down not only his family but his whole world.

"We must hope for the best," his sister said to me as a hired caterer poured her a second glass of champagne. "Sometimes a marriage of opposites turns out surprisingly well."

"We are rather the long and the short of it," I said, deliberately misunderstanding. "Anyway, we've given it a good trial, so we're pretty sure we'll be able to make a go of it."

The look she gave me made it clear that that was not the sort of thing that was said at weddings in Kopinski circles.

Physically, as I say, we made a pretty funny picture walking down the aisle. Sam was about five foot two, with a figure that could best be described as squat. He looked like a frog who's been in the hands of a circus trainer. His features were—unlike most of his family's—splendidly Jewish, and he rejoiced in it. "Why try to look what you're not?" he used to ask. "If I tried to look Eton and Oxford I wouldn't succeed, and it would be a confidence trick if I did."

I on the other hand was—still am—a fine figure of a woman, to use the old-fashioned term. Five foot nine, good firm figure, incredibly well-shaped legs. I'd look good in any East End pub, and I'd have blokes coming up to me if I was on my own. In fact, that had been the story of my life since I was a well-developed sixteen.

"I hate the way his family's looking down on you," said my friend Val to me in the Ladies, as the wedding wound down to its final whimper. "It's Sam who's getting the best deal, marrying you."

" 'Course it is," I said calmly, piling on the lipstick. "It's no fun having a little runt like that scrambling round on top of you."

I should have checked the cubicles. His sister emerged and marched out, her face rhododendron-pink.

"Ooops!" I said. "Naughty me!"

You will have guessed by now that I was not making a marriage of love. Probably you have assumed that I married Sam for his money, but that wasn't in fact the heart of the matter. Oh, I could spend money with the best of them, and enjoy myself doing so, but what I really loved, and love, was the process of making money. I liked managing a business, watching it grow, adding more businesses, amalgamating, leading at the end of it all to a business

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empire. I knew I had a wonderful commercial brain. Whatever happened I would prosper in the world. By marrying Sam I merely cut out the first rungs of the ladder, starting out at a point where I could give adequate opportunity to my gifts.

I had worked in one of Sam's little chain of stores, all called Occasionals, when I was a teenager. I'd left for a spell in a big London department store, where I had learnt to hide my commonness under a genteel mask when the occasion demanded—though never getting rid of the hardness that went with the commonness, for that would have been fatal to my ambitions. When I was twenty-four, and ready for my first move up the ladder, I met Sam again in an East London pub, the Old Mare.

"Well, hello, Mr. Kopinski. Long time no see!"

His eyes lit up at the sight of me. Sam was always excited by large, well-formed women, particularly young ones. But having smiled, he frowned.

"Lovely to see you again too, Miss . . . er, I don't quite remember your—"

"Your Walthamstow branch. I was just a slip of a thing. Remember now?"

"Ah yes! Miss—"

"Hayton. Maggie Lou Hayton."

"Of course," he lied. "I remember you well. Always knew you'd go far."

So that was how it had begun. I should add that I'd gone to work at Occasionals because I saw the chain's potential, and I'd never changed my opinion while working in central London. Furthermore, I knew the Old Mare was Sam Kopinski's favourite pub, and that he was always there early on a Wednesday evening, which was why I was there to meet up with him. You have to make your chances in life, that's what I believe. So the first move was mine, and mine was all the running thereafter.

I was twenty-six when we married. We'd been living together for eighteen months, and I knew Sam through and through. I wouldn't have married him if I hadn't already made some suggestions on business matters, seen him consider them seriously, then act on them. When we got back from the honeymoon (which was in Brighton, because Sam hated "abroad," and loved going into swish hotels with his king-size prize on his arm—or more accurately with him on mine), I lost no time in involving myself in the business. I went around with him to the different branches of Occasionals,

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sussed out the tastes of the various locations they were situated in, and made suggestions about stock, staffing, moves toward a different market. Sam already knew I had a flair. Soon he began to say I had a sort of genius.

"I just don't know what I'd do without you now," he often said.

In point of fact, his doing without me was not at all what I envisioned for the future.

I quite soon became a sort of fixture—a power that the shop managers had to reckon with. If Sam couldn't pay his regular visit—because of a board meeting, a business deal, or whatever—I went instead. Most of the managers would very much rather have had Sam than me, but one or two of them recognised a kindred soul in me, understood what I was trying to do with the business, and I noted them down for preferment when the time came.

It was the moment for the firm to be branching out, diversifying, developing other interests. Sam saw that, but he was too timid to act on it. It was me who gave him the backbone. "What else do I know about but clothes?" he would wail. "What else do *we* know about?" I corrected him. We bought into a small chain of jewellers specialising in Oriental pieces, a firm of delicatessens based in Hampstead, and one or two other things. We were testing the waters, enlarging my experience.

And so things went on for a year, eighteen months. I had a timetable, and I didn't envisage rushing things. It's people who rush things who get caught out, one way or another. Apart from the expansion of the business, I wanted gradually to detach Sam from his hoity-toity family. I didn't want any of the loot willed in their direction on the principle of "to them that hath." Though oddly enough it was after only a few months of marriage that one night, when we were smooching away in front of late-night television, Sam said:

"You've made me so happy, do you know that? There isn't anybody else in the world could have made me so happy. I'm going to make a new will tomorrow leaving everything to you. So there's no questions or nastiness."

And he was as good as his word. In a couple of days' time he showed me a copy, entrusted to me. I did question in my mind whether it was a will designed to prevent any nastiness after his death, but I gave him a big sloppy kiss and kept quiet about that. I could cope with the Kopinskis in all their ramifications.

But, as I say, I was in no hurry. I would have been happy to stay married to Sam three, four, even five years, so as to get every detail

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of the business under my belt, under my skin. Even in the eighteen months, I had got various friends and like minds into positions of responsibility, including a job for Val in the small PR department at head office. So when fate struck, at a party there, Val was present to witness it.

It was a party to celebrate a tie-up between Occasionals and a production company, Banglawear—a British company which used the cheap labour of Bangladeshi women living in Britain. It was a neat, lean operation, and the tie-up had great possibilities. I was the hostess at the party, but everybody there knew I was also one of the brains behind the expansion of Kopinski Limited. Sam and I were standing by the food table watching the throng when a man came up.

"Wonderful party—just what was needed to get this off the ground," he said. "You're lucky, Sam—your wife's not only beautiful, but she's got a fine business brain as well."

And that was it. It may have been his voice—cockney, but softened, rather like mine. It may have been the fact that he was six foot three, with strong shoulders, dark wavy hair, and a square chin. I always did like my men, when there was a choice, big. Whatever it was, I knew that this was him, this was the man I had to have.

"Here," said Sam, chuckling, "I'm not sure I like my business associates making up to my wife in public."

I folded him to my midriff, mussing his hair, and looked at the man. Val was watching us. She says that when she saw that look she knew that Sam was a goner.

His name, I found out very quickly, was Wayne Donovan. He was officially the head accountant, actually the creative financial brain behind Banglawear. I made sure I rang him the next day on business. By the end of the week we were lovers.

Sam never knew, I'm quite sure of that. I told him shortly afterwards that what I needed to do was an economics diploma.

"What do you want with one of them?" he demanded. "I've never felt the need."

"I've got to see the larger picture," I said. "I understand about cash flow, diversification, things like that, but I need to get the context."

Nothing could have been further from the truth. My business sense is pure instinct, and I don't need any poncy professors pushing their theories at me. Still, it served its turn. I was out three evenings a week, and though I was learning a lot, I wasn't sitting in any

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lecture room. That left four evenings, and I was always especially loving to Sam on those four. I don't know how I found the strength.

Wayne was a wonderful lover. He was full of surprises—and I don't just mean what you think I mean either. Even out of bed he always seemed to have something up his sleeve, something that would make every evening I spent with him special. One time he hired the most wonderful little Oriental pair to prepare a Chinese banquet for two. Another time, on a fine midsummer evening, he drove us down to Kent and we had a balloon trip over the Channel. Once, when we were eating on the balcony of a first-rate eatery in Yorkshire somewhere, he had the local colliery brass band along to serenade us. That was since we were married, when we haven't had to be discreet. It's been a great liberation for Wayne; it's as if he wants to tell the whole wide world how much he loves me. Could a girl ask for more?

Wayne says he grew up on the toughest council estate in East London, and I can believe him. You don't come from that sort of background and get to where he's got without making some pretty dodgy acquaintances along the way. When, after three months of ecstatic loving, and when I was quite sure of my man, I broached the subject of Sam, Wayne just said: "You leave that to me. I've got mates who'll take care of him. But it'll cost you a couple of thou."

The cheapness of it took my breath away.

"I can spend that on a party dress," I said. "Are you sure you're getting the best?"

"The best money can buy. Start thinking about your widow's weeds."

It was beginning to be urgent. I'd realised a day or two before that I was pregnant. Sam would never have imagined it could be anyone's but his, but I didn't want his bloody family starting to pry into my affairs, which they might if I produced a six-foot-three baby. I wanted Sam well out of the way before it was born. Wayne and I discussed a hit and run, but in the end we decided on an armed robbery that went wrong. For a pot-bellied runt, Sam was remarkably careless about carrying large sums of money. Regularly once a month, we would go to the casino down the road from head office and he'd carry with him a hefty wad of cash. It was quite unnecessary, but I think it excited him. That month I pleaded off.

"I've got this nagging headache," I said. "Do you know, I think I could be pregnant."

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So Sam died happy as a sandboy. When the police came to tell me I wailed: "If only I'd gone with him. They'd never have attacked him if I'd been with him." Too bloody right they wouldn't!

There I was, then, a merry widow, and the only problem was not letting the merriness show. I behaved admirably at the funeral, and if Sam's family let themselves down by showing their greed and suspicion—well, it reflected only on them, not on me. It was a good ten days after his death before I went to work and resumed the reins, this time riding solo.

Not that I intended riding solo for long.

Quite soon after that I decided that the tie-up with Banglawear was so successful that it should be strengthened and extended. That meant a great deal of consultation with their chief accountant. People got used to his being in and out of the office, to our lunching together, even going off together in the evening. I expect Val made a few meaningful remarks, so everyone was prepared for the inevitable.

We got married very quietly. In fact, it was downright secretive, if you want to know the truth. I wanted Sam's family to be presented with a *fait accompli*. I wrote the day after to Sam's sister saying I couldn't bear the thought of baby growing up without a father. In the office I varied this slightly. "I want baby to have a father," I said. "And quite apart from that, he's so gorgeous . . ." Because no one who knew Wayne would think I married him just as a father for my unborn child.

"Oh, baby will have a father all right," Val said to me in private. "I wouldn't bother with the 'step' bit, if I were you."

I like Val. She's sharp like me. I slip her a thousand now and then on top of her wages. Of course she *knows* nothing, but I like to have her on my side.

Wayne was delighted when the baby came. Not that he's one of those modern fathers who practically claim a fifty-percent stake in the pregnancy, hold your hand during labour, and spend all their time bathing baby and changing nappies afterwards. He's old-fashioned. He thinks that's woman's work, so we got an au pair, a sparkling little Italian girl called Renata. It means there's never any problem with our working all day, and we can even get off on weekends alone together. Don't get the idea I don't love little Stephen, though, just because I'm not going to let him interfere with my career. I dote on him. If I'm working late at the office I often phone Renata and tell her to bring him in, so I can have a bit of

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time with him. She brought him in yesterday at the end of a party we threw for the top people of a PR firm we're starting to use. When I saw him I just threw my arms around him and kissed his little face. It must have made very good PR.

"This is the man in my life!" I said to the guests.

"Here—where does that leave me?" Wayne asked humourously.

I bundled Stephen back to Renata and buried my face in his marvellous chest.

"All right—he's the baby in my life. There's only one man in my life, and that's you till the day I die!"

I sensed that Wayne was looking at Renata, probably to put her and baby in their proper places. He *is* the only man in my life, and I'm the only woman in his.

We're going away this weekend—some secret destination Wayne has worked out. I expect he's got some tremendous surprise lined up for me as part of it. Val has left a message on my answering machine saying to ring her urgently, but it'll do when we get back. If she wants more money she's not going to get it. You can overstep the bounds of friendship. And all she's got to go on is a *look*—and you can't make evidence out of a look. It doesn't bother me at all. I'm going to concentrate on wonderful Wayne and the surprise he'll have waiting for me this weekend.

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a *NEW* Baytown story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

In previous Baytown stories, William Bankier has taken readers into the preserves of many of the town's institutions. Here his tale turns around the local radio station. This is a business Mr. Bankier knows from personal experience, for at the outset of his career he worked for a stint as an announcer for CJBQ in Belleville, Ontario . . .

SO WRONG AT THE FAIR

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Los Angeles traffic was not that much different from Baytown traffic. There was just more of it. Peel Masterson appeared to be asleep in the passenger seat. This was okay with Alice Kelly. She liked to drive, she was good at it. The trip on the freeway from the airport to the San Fernando Valley had been intense. Now she was guiding the shiny rental car along Ventura Boulevard.

"There's the Exhibition Center," she said. The building looked like an aircraft hangar with a giant balloon attached to the roof. A banner on the balloon announced, Welcome International Radio Convention.

Masterson sat up and opened his eyes. "See if you can spot a motel."

Masterson had arrived at CBAY last winter as the new program director. Nobody was sure why he left a radio station in Montreal to take what seemed to be a step backwards. He explained that he had been only an assistant PD. So the Baytown job offered a greater challenge.

Alice soon determined that Masterson had feet of clay. He wore stiff suits and shiny shoes and he strode around frowning at people,

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speaking from the diaphragm with a voice of depth and resonance. But there was not much behind it. She sensed the newcomer was full to the brim with insecurity. She wanted to grab his cheeks and pinch them to bring out some color.

One month into the job, Peel Masterson nearly got himself fired. Alice, the music librarian, saw it coming and saved him. Now she was making Peel return the favor. She had let him know she wanted to go along on this trip. Masterson made up a story about needing her and the Old Man bought it. So here she was in L.A. Besides attending the exhibition, she should be able to visit her married sister Rita, who was living in Malibu.

"There's a place just past the Center," she pointed out.

"Harmony Motel," her companion recited. "Vacancy."

Alice registered for a single while Peel did the same. In her room, before unpacking, she telephoned her sister. Rita was married to a man who directed documentary films. Arthur Parker had worked as an usher at the Baytown Cinema. Everybody considered him a loser, but Rita must have seen something else. Years later, she was living in a beachfront house in Malibu with six-year-old twins named Tim and Tom. And a housekeeper who identified herself as Dominga.

"Is Mrs. Parker there? I'm her sister, from Canada."

Rita had not changed. Here was the high-pitched, querulous voice, the tone of impatience. She listened to Alice's explanation of how she happened to be in Los Angeles. "Aren't you just the librarian? How did you get to come? Not that it isn't fine to have you in town."

"I saved Peel's job. He was about to fire the Stoney Lonesome Trio."

"I remember them," Rita said. "They play guitars and sing. There were only two of them but they kept meaning to add one more."

"Peel placed a dismissal notice in their message box. I fished it out and tore it up. He didn't realize the Old Man has a summer house in Stoney Lonesome. The Trio is his personal discovery."

Alice said she would drive to the beach that afternoon. She put down the telephone and went to collect Peel from the room next door. They lunched on beer and sandwiches in the motel diner, then walked across an acre of parking lot to the convention hall.

"Tell me again what we're here for," Alice said.

His mind was elsewhere. "To improve ourselves."

For half an hour they roamed crowded aisles between displays set up by distributors and packagers. In the babble of a thousand voices,

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it was not necessary to speak. Suddenly, Masterson picked up the pace.

"Familiar faces in a strange land," he piped, leading Alice to a booth where leaflets were being handed out by a man and a woman. He was a beefy youth with a florid complexion. She was in her early fifties, perhaps, but gorgeously fit and spiffy. Her plump face radiated confidence.

A sign made of red sequins announced, Hector Patrie Communications. Masterson raised a hand in greeting. "Hello, Marie! What a pleasant surprise!"

"Why, it's Peel!" the lady responded. She beamed under a broad-brimmed scarlet hat jammed on top of jet-black curls. "Peel Masterson is here!"

Introductions were performed. Alice met Luc Patrie and his mother, Marie. She and her husband Hector ran a Montreal company that provided consulting services. They were offering a seminar called "Talking to French Canada." Peel signed on for the meeting at seven o'clock that evening. Alice had other plans.

"Where is your husband?" Peel enquired.

"He was unable to travel," Marie said flatly. Then she enthused, "Guess where Luc and I are staying? Chantal Lafleur gave us the use of her house in Benedict Canyon. She's filming in Spain."

Luc said, "It has a heated pool. You should drop in."

Chantal Lafleur was a pretty good pop singer. And she starred in a mediocre soap on the French TV network. Apparently, her career was taking off. As they walked away from the booth, Alice said, "While you're at the seminar, I'll drive to the beach and see my sister."

"Give her my regards."

"Were you good friends with Mrs. Patrie in Montreal?"

"She's why I left," Peel said. Then he added, "Can you keep a secret? I've been in love with that woman for a lot of years."

Later that afternoon, Alice headed west in the rented car, along Ventura Boulevard to Topanga Canyon Drive, then down the twisting canyon road past spectacular hillsides, all the way to Pacific Coast Highway. Here, she turned northward and continued on to the seafront town of Malibu with its pier, slowly advancing breakers, and immense blue sky.

After stopping for directions, she arrived at a rambling frame house half buried under crimson blossoms. There was shrubbery, a

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sloping lawn, an astonishing view of the Pacific, and a jeep parked on a driveway of crushed seashells. Alice's envy made her queasy. She parked behind the jeep and sat for a while, taking deep breaths.

A door opened and Rita Kelly-Parker appeared on the porch. She was in biker shorts and a denim shirt. Her lashings of blond hair were braided and knotted. She held a nearly empty glass in her hand. Two half-naked little boys ran onto the porch, saw the stranger, recoiled against their mother's thighs, and wrapped tanned arms around her.

"Hello, you lot!" Alice forced the enthusiasm as she climbed out of the car.

The living room was shadowy-cool. Alice sipped a drink and allowed herself to sink into the softness of a battered corduroy couch. The twins, Tim and Tom, were out of the house now, having done fifteen minutes of wheedling appeals and sidelong glances. Now it was just the sisters. Arthur Parker, it turned out, was on location in Nevada, directing a documentary on the arrival of aliens from outer space.

"His premise is different," Rita explained. "Remember the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers?* The aliens took over the bodies of nice people and they became cold-eyed zombies. Arthur believes the aliens are taking over the bodies of people who are cold-eyed zombies to begin with. These people then become warm-hearted, outgoing individuals."

Alice absorbed the idea. "That's why life is even tolerable. Some of us are inhabited by aliens."

"I don't have anything in the house for dinner."

"I can't stay anyway."

The girls began remembering. "You were always different," Alice said. "It was predictable you'd end up here."

"You make it sound like the gutter."

"Soon as I finished high school, I went to work. Mom and Dad still need help, and I do all I can. You ran off to Toronto and pretended to go to college. I could never figure out how you got away with that."

"Show me where it's written that you had to sacrifice yourself. You did that because it's you. And the same thing explains me."

Later, Alice was half angry, half amused when she said, "How did you figure out Arthur Parker was going to turn into Arthur Parker? He was such a dweeb in that usher's uniform."

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"We connected," Rita said. "A lot of it has been luck. There were plenty of times when he could have gone belly up. He may still."

As the sun went down, Rita relented. "Oh hell, why don't you stay. We can order in food."

"Let me telephone my colleague and say I won't be back until late."

"Sleep over, why don't you."

There was no answer from Peel's room when Alice called the motel. Her colleague was probably out enjoying himself with his old flame, Marie. She told Rita about the relationship. "He said he's been in love with her for years."

"Then you were brought here as a beard."

"A what?"

"A third person to make a rendezvous look legit. If Masterson is with you, there can't be anything going on between him and Madame Patrie."

"I think I'm here to drive the car."

The night was restful with an open window letting in the constant sound of waves. In the morning, Alice began to worry when she called Peel's number and there was still no answer. The motel owner went so far as to walk down the line and take a look inside the room. He came back and said the bed had not been slept in.

Alice put down the telephone quietly, with both hands. "He never came back last night. And there's no message for me. I have a bad feeling."

Rita began putting the remains of breakfast through the garbage disposal. She switched it off. "I hate to see you worry. Let's drive in and ask some questions."

"You can't leave the twins."

Rita found Dominga and advised her she would be having the pleasure of the boys' company until that evening. Then she began tossing things into a shoulder bag.

"I haven't been anywhere in two weeks," she said. "Come on, we'll take your car."

Midmorning, the exhibition hall was just coming to life. Alice led the way to the Patrie Communications booth. Luc Patrie was moving around behind the counter. He was putting things into a cardboard box standing open. There was an end-of-term look to what he was doing.

"Remember me?" Alice said.

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"What can I do for you?" The young French Canadian did not look up from his packing.

"I'm trying to find Peel Masterson. He never came back to the motel last night. I know he was here in the evening for your seminar."

"Who did you say?" Luc picked up a sheet of paper that seemed to have a list of names typed on it.

"Peel Masterson. Come on, I was with him. He's your mother's friend."

"No such name on the list." Luc lifted a stack of brochures from the counter and stowed them inside the box.

Alice began to boil over. "Peel came to L.A. to be with Marie. He told me about it. Why are you lying?"

"I can't talk to you now. I've got a plane to catch."

"The fair is on for another week. Why are you closing?"

"Family problem in Montreal. My father is not well. Mother left yesterday."

"I don't believe you. I'm coming back with the police."

Rita touched Alice's shoulder. "Let's go."

As she was being led away, Alice protested, "Something has happened to Peel. Where can we find a policeman?"

"The cops won't do anything. Not right away. Your friend could have gone off somewhere to enjoy himself."

"Do you believe that?"

They were outside. Rita saw a diner and headed that way. "Come on. I'll buy you coffee and we'll decide what to do."

When the coffee was served, with cinnamon toast, Rita dunked her wedge and said, "It's like an old movie which is based on a story called 'So Long at the Fair.' " She described how a brother and sister checked into separate rooms at a Paris hotel during the Great Exposition in the 1890s. Next day, when the sister looked for her brother, there was no sign of him. His name was gone from the register. The hotel owners disclaimed all knowledge of him.

Alice was still simmering. "What happened to him?"

"Turned out he got sick in the night. He'd been vacationing in Turkey or some such place. A doctor came and diagnosed bubonic plague. If word got out, everybody would leave town, the Exposition would be ruined. So they took him to a remote hospital where he died. And they tried to cover up his existence."

"Did the sister ever find out?"

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"Yes, with the help of a man who believed her. It's a doozie of a detective story."

Alice sipped coffee for about a minute. Then she said, "We've never been friends, exactly. But we are sisters. Will you help me find out what happened to Peel Masterson?"

"Yes."

"It probably means flying back to Montreal. If she's gone back there, Peel must be with her."

Rita said, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Why are you going to all this trouble?"

"I've been asking myself the same question." Alice looked around the diner at all the strangers locked into their hopes and troubles. "When Peel came to CBAY, he was out of place. I sort of adopted him. Now it's as if he owes me something. He can't just vanish without even saying goodbye."

"Give it another day for him to show up. And for me to clear it with my husband. Then we go." Rita put money on the check and they went outside. The heat after the air-conditioned diner was somewhere between oven and blast furnace. "You have to promise me one thing after we get to Montreal," she said.

"What's that?"

"You won't ask me to go back with you to Baytown."

Rita was enjoying the Montreal telephone directory. "Four pages of Tremblays," she marveled.

Alice was seated by the window of their twenty-seventh-floor hotel room. The city below was crowded into the space between Mt. Royal and the river. Montreal, she decided, was a box so full the lid could not be closed. "You're supposed to be finding Patrie Communications," she said.

Rita turned pages. "Here it is. And here's the owner, Hector Patrie." She recited an address.

It was a twenty-minute journey by taxi. They drove out of commercial streets and raced along a rise with the mountain on their left and open fields on the right. Kids were playing soccer. A left turn brought them onto the curve of Côte Ste. Catherine Road. Fine houses stood back from the street.

The Patrie residence was of brick and wood painted gleaming white. There were three floors under a roof like a cloche hat. Twenty steps led up to a semicircular porch. Rita got there first and pressed

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a large, flat button. The sound inside was of deep chimes.

Alice arrived out of breath. "Maybe we should have telephoned."

"Bad idea. If Marie and Peel are here, better not to warn them."

The door was opened by a tall man wearing dark trousers and a striped vest over a pale blue shirt and black bow tie. He had winged eyebrows on a parchment face. He heard Alice out, then led them inside and down a corridor, saying, "I will ask if the colonel can see you."

"Masterpiece Theater," Rita whispered as they followed along.

They waited on maroon leather chairs in a mostly mahogany room lined with books and trimmed with brass and crystal. Colonel Hector Patrie arrived on two canes. He was a broad-shouldered man of military bearing in a fine grey suit, white shirt, and polka-dot tie. The black shoes he wore were brilliantly polished. He was elderly, but the pale blue eyes were full of life.

"What a delightful surprise," he said in excellent English, slightly accented. He swung himself behind a desk, laid the canes across it, and lowered himself onto a cushioned chair. "Can I offer you something?"

"We just finished breakfast," Alice said.

"Come back in twenty minutes, Tremblay," he said to the servant, who left the room. The colonel slapped the canes. "Shrapnel," he said. "Happened at Dieppe. I was lucky to get off the beach. Some said afterwards it was a futile exercise. I disagree. Without Dieppe, D-Day would have been far more costly." The old soldier's eyes went out of focus. "But the losses," he said quietly. "The men cut down."

"You seem in good health, sir," Rita said.

"I feel fine."

"We understood from Luc in Los Angeles that Marie hurried home because you were ill. Luc was closing up the booth to follow her."

"Some misunderstanding." Patrie turned to Alice. "Tremblay said you're from the radio station in Baytown. Fine part of the world. Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment. Those boys did well in Italy. Germans were heavily fortified."

There was no bringing the old soldier forward from the 1940s. The visit was not unpleasant. But it was like sitting in a cinema watching old newsreels. When Alice asked if Luc was in the house, it became obvious they would learn nothing from the colonel.

"My son is downtown at the Windsor Hotel. Her Majesty, the young Queen Elizabeth, is there with Prince Philip. We were honored when they asked Luc to organize the motorcade. Most im-

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portant, this royal visit, with war clouds on the horizon."

The sisters were thinking of leaving when Luc Patrie came through the doorway, almost at a run. Tremblay, obviously, had told him about the visitors.

"We were talking about you," the colonel said. He struggled to his feet. "Old friends of yours."

The blood was gone from Luc's face. He seemed to be just holding on.

"How went the royal event?"

"Splendidly, Father. Cheering crowds all along the route."

Colonel Patrie spread his hands, the proposition proved. "And some try to say that French Canadians are not patriotic!" There was silence during which the old gentleman's mind tried to focus. "They were asking about Marie," he said.

"Don't you remember what I told you? Marie stayed in Los Angeles to open the California office. There's great interest in Canadian broadcasting there. She might be away for some time." Luc went to the doorway and turned. "I know you have a busy schedule, ladies. Let me show you out."

He did not stop at the front door. He led the sisters across the porch and down the concrete steps to the street. "There's a taxi stand at the corner," he said.

"What's going on?" Alice said. "In L.A., you told us Marie flew home to be with her husband. By the way, there's a big difference in age."

"When they got married, he was much more vigorous. And Marie doesn't show her years." Luc looked up at the great house as if it were a ship about to sail. "My father can't handle information. You saw how he is. There's no way I could tell him what's happened between Marie and your friend."

"Which is?"

"He came and got her and they took off for Mexico."

The Kelly girls looked at him out of narrowed eyes. "Why not just tell us that?" Rita suggested.

"I was embarrassed."

Taxis were indeed waiting at the end of the street. Riding back to the hotel, Rita said, "He's still lying."

Alice said, "I know that."

"I think we just have to forget it. There's nothing we can tell the police. No evidence of a crime."

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"I keep thinking of that movie you described. *So Long at the Fair.* She kept searching for her brother. But all the time he was dead."

Rita did something she had not done since childhood. She reached for her sister's hand. "Peel Masterson is not your brother," she said. "You told me you didn't even like him that much."

"But I hate this feeling that he's been killed."

Rita paid the driver. She followed Alice into the hotel lobby and found her standing at a car-rental counter. "What gives?"

"I'm about to betray a promise."

"I don't want to hear this."

"You've come all this way and it's been for nothing. So in order that it won't be a total loss, I decided we'd rent a car and drive on down to Baytown."

Highway 401 from Montreal seemed too long for Alice. For Rita, it was too short. She watched landmarks through the passenger-side window—the golf course, the hospital. "We're almost there," she moaned. "Shouldn't we get me a motel?"

"Our room still has two beds in it," Alice said. "Mom and Dad would never understand."

"Do they look ancient?"

The street had not changed. Mr. Kelly was kneeling on the lawn, digging out a dandelion with a kitchen knife. It came free, revealing a splendid root. He tossed it into a plastic bag. Mrs. Kelly was standing in the tiny enclosed porch behind the screen door, smoking a cigarette.

"Hi, Dad! Hi, Mom!" The sisters climbed out of the car and moved along a narrow sidewalk leading to the front steps.

"Your car, Rita?" the old man said.

"It's a rental."

"Looks like the kind of car you'd operate."

"Dad, I would hardly drive all the way here from Los Angeles. And those are not California plates." Her father struggled to a standing position. They collided over kisses on the cheek. "We drive a Jeep."

"That's a good way to get yourself killed."

From behind her screen, Mrs. Kelly said, "You've put on weight."

"I eat a lot of Mexican food."

"I thought you said California."

Rita whispered to Alice, "Get me out of here."

Dinner was sausages and mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, and tinned peaches. "There's a thing you can do," Rita said. "Keep the tin in the fridge and the peaches will be chilled."

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"No room in there," Mrs. Kelly said.

"The tin gets wet," her father told her. "The label peels off."

After the meal, the table was cleared and they played Monopoly. Rita's token, as in days of yore, was the milk bottle. She was lucky, acquiring two sets of property, putting up hotels, collecting huge rents from the other players. Mrs. Kelly sold everything she landed on, hoarding her money under the board on her side.

In bed that night, Rita said, "I can hear the trains." The window was propped open on a tall screen. The railway station was half a mile away, down the hill past the canning factory.

"You don't have to hang around," Alice murmured. "I'm used to it."

"I want to go with you to work tomorrow. I've never seen the inside of CBAY."

"But after that, deliver the car back to Montreal. Enjoy some free time before you catch your plane."

Rita came to a conclusion as her eyes closed. "They're just these two funny old people."

The radio station came as a surprise to the younger sister. It was not a large place, nor was it imposing. The ground floor housed a reception desk, three business offices, and a bullpen where the announcers sometimes sat at typewriters and wrote their own commercials. The newsroom was a closet with a teletype printer in it.

Upstairs, there were two studios separated by the control room. The equipment looked homemade, which was more or less true. Bucky, the engineer, had put most of it together himself. Alice's music library was a narrow room crammed with shelves of records and tapes. There were large file cabinets containing sixteen-inch transcriptions.

The receptionist caught up with Alice and told her she was wanted in the Old Man's office. Rita said, "I'll go out for coffee."

"No, come with me. I'd like you to meet my boss."

The station owner was cordial. He placed the young women in seats at opposite sides of his office so he could swing back and forth in his swivel chair to speak to one and then the other. He wanted to talk about Peel Masterson. "I knew it was a bad idea to let you two go to California," he said.

Alice had been trying to work out what to say about the program director's disappearance. "There was this woman from Montreal," she began.

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"I know about her. She's the reason he decided to defect." He opened a drawer and took out an audio cassette. "Tell me what you think of this telephone message. It came in on my private line when I wasn't here and was recorded on my answering machine." He slipped the cassette into a playback and pressed a button.

"Hello, old sport. This is your wandering boy calling from sunny Southern Cal." Peel sounded more than a little drunk. "How are you? How's your old straw hat? Ever been felt? Guess where I am at this moment. I am in the million-dollar residence of Chantal Lafleur. No, I haven't started hanging around with movie actresses. She's in Spain, filming. I am with the woman I love. Say hello to old sport, Marie."

"Hello, old sport," Marie Patrie said, from a distance. She was not as drunk as her companion.

"So I will not be coming back to Baytown. Not ever. This is my official resignation. You can keep your Stoney Lonesome Trio. Both of them."

A buzzer sounded in the great house in the Hollywood Hills. "See who that is, Marie," Peel said. "It isn't that I don't like Baytown. Baytown is a fine place. But I have more exciting plans for the rest of my life."

Voices rose in the background. Marie could be heard saying, "Luc, don't start trouble!" She sounded frightened.

Then, no mistaking the voice, Luc Patrie said, "Mother, I am going to make more trouble than you can handle."

"I have to hang up now," Peel said. "But I resign. Say goodbye to everybody."

The last words on the tape before the dial tone came from Marie. "If you don't get out, Luc, I'll call the police!"

When the Old Man switched off the machine, Alice looked at Rita. Then she said to her boss, "When did that call come in?"

"A few days ago."

"Did you report it?"

"No. I was waiting to hear what you'd say when you heard it. What was going on there?"

Without asking permission, Alice lifted the desk telephone and began to dial.

A week later, Chief of Police Greb was back in Baytown, having been to Montreal and then to Los Angeles in company with Luc Patrie and two RCMP officers. Greb made a report to the Old Man

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at the radio station. Present were Alice Kelly and her sister Rita, who had decided to stick it out at home until the case was closed.

"Luc Patrie," the chief said, "was both possessive of his mother and protective of his father. Hector Patrie is infirm, physically and mentally."

"We saw him," Alice said.

"Luc felt like his proxy. He tried to do what he believed his father would want done in most situations. This one was difficult."

"Peel Masterson hitting on Marie."

"That was mutual," the policeman said. "Peel went to L.A. to meet Marie and run away to Mexico with her. There was a seminar in the Patrie booth at the exhibition. When it ended, the pair left together. Luc saw them go. A short time later, he closed the booth and drove up to Chantal Lafleur's house in Benedict Canyon."

"Is that where he killed them?"

"Yes. It began with a fight." The chief described how Luc confronted Masterson, ordered him out of the house. They struggled poolside, then fell into deep water. Luc was the stronger swimmer. He held Masterson's head under until he was unconscious. "Marie tried to perform CPR but couldn't do it. Her son refused to help. She ran inside to telephone the paramedics. Luc put a stop to that. He knocked her onto the bed."

"He killed his mother?" Rita was fascinated.

"She was going to blow the whistle. He felt he had no choice. Remember, he was convinced in his mind that he was protecting his father from shame and dishonor. So he held a pillow over her face until she stopped breathing."

"He told you all this?" The Old Man was subdued.

"Once he heard his own voice on the tape, he decided to cooperate. He guided us into the Mojave Desert to the place where he buried the bodies."

"Where is Luc now?"

"Behind bars in L.A. Awaiting trial for murder."

Alice loaded Rita's bags into the trunk of the rented car and slammed the lid. Her sister was behind the wheel, warming the engine. It had been a chilly night. Their parents were standing some distance away on the lawn, as if they had been driven from the house by fire.

"What about those two?" Rita inclined her head. "When are you going to talk to them?"

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"After I've explored the job possibilities in L.A.," Alice said. "A music librarian should be able to work anywhere."

"When my husband gets back, I'll ask him to make some calls. He has contacts."

Alice turned and waved at the old people. "Go back inside, you'll catch cold." They moved slowly across the ground, like cloud shadows. "They don't need any more Canadian winters."

Rita gunned the engine. The car began to move, then stopped. "You learn something, even at my age."

"What's that?"

"You try to have a good time at the fair. Then you turn around and somebody's gone. Somebody you care about."

"Drive safely, Rita."

"Persuade them to make the move. I'd enjoy having you guys in the neighborhood."

The car drove away and Alice stood alone in front of the house, waving until her sister turned the corner.

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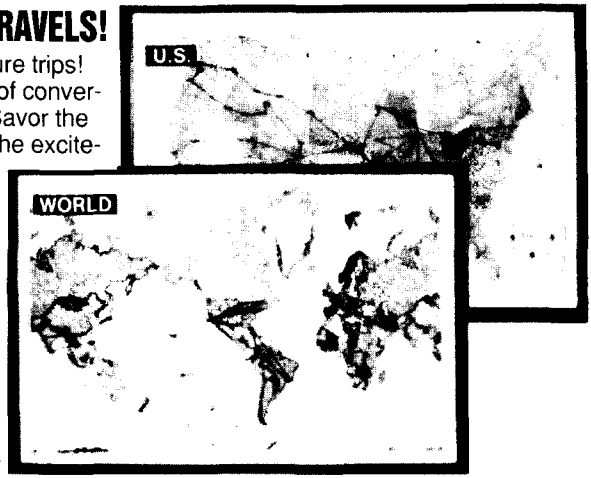

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a *NEW* short story by

HENRY SLESAR

Like many other crime writers, Henry Slesar has pursued a career as an advertising executive while at the same time producing an impressive body of fiction. Perhaps it is his skills as an ad man that make him so good at finding an immediate hook for the reader in his fiction . . .

THE DEAL

by HENRY SLESAR

In his shaving mirror, the bathroom door ajar, Trevin could see Felice interlocking her diamond earrings through the pierced flesh of her lobes. The process made his stomach turn, or maybe it was merely the sight of her skeletal shoulders hunched over the flouncy dressing table, her weak eyes forcing her face close to the mirror. She had starved that face to the limit. The skull seemed anxious to push through the skin. Too thin, Trevin thought, if not too rich.

He wiped off excess cream and examined his own face. The opposite problem. Still handsome, he decided, but getting fleshy. He thumped his midsection. Not an ironing board anymore. He made himself a vague promise involving diet and Nautilus machines. The depressing prospect added an edge of irritability as he emerged.

"Why are we doing this?" he said. "What made Newhall invite us to dinner? We never socialized with the man, he's a bookkeeper, for God's sake."

"He's a great deal more than that and you know it." She smacked her lips, transferring lipstick. "Besides, I couldn't refuse any longer, it was the third invitation. You won't suffer too much," she added drily. "I've heard he has a pretty wife."

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Felice enjoyed her sly digs. She liked bringing the topic of infidelity out into the open. It was her voodoo. By mocking the subject, she prevented it. Oddly enough, except for odd occasions, it had been effective.

Trevin drove the Lexus. She didn't want to take Raymond and the Rolls, not wanting to overdramatize the contrast between their lifestyles. Not that the Newhalls lived in poverty. The neighborhood was solidly upper middle class, the house a respectable two-story Colonial.

Sam Newhall, greeting them at the door, seemed almost pathetically grateful for their visit. Trevin had never really looked at the man before; he was just a bulky briefcased figure who would show up once a month and closet himself with Felice in her study. Now he saw that he was a big, florid man with crinkly blue eyes, athletically built, balding. Trevin, who always played comparison games, was pleased at the latter. He smoothed back his own full head of hair and shook Newhall's hand as if he was actually glad to be there.

A moment later, he was. In the Newhall's decorator-correct living room, Daria Newhall came towards them, walking hips first like the model she had once been. She was her husband's age, slightly past forty, but her hair was blond again, her mouth full and sensuous. She wore a loose-fitting dress, but movement defined a shapely figure. If Felice was playing a comparison game too, she must have known she was losing.

The small talk was unusually small, but Newhall kept their glasses filled. Daria said almost nothing until she heard that Trevin ran an art gallery on Madison Avenue. "I just love paintings," she said. "But I'm so ignorant I'm afraid to have any opinions about them."

"Trevin doesn't have any opinions, either," Felice said pleasantly. "That's why he manages it so well." Trevin smiled. It could have been worse. She could have told them that the gallery was her Christmas gift to him, a place for him to go every morning.

At the dinner table, Newhall made only one attempt to involve Trevin in the conversation. He asked if Trevin liked camping. It was his passion, he said, but his wife hated tents and trees and strange animal calls. Trevin said he wasn't much for the great outdoors himself. He preferred the strange animal calls of the city. Felice said:

"There's one outdoor thing we do. We both love to ride. That's where we first met, on a bridle path."

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"Which led to the bridal path." Newhall laughed, enjoying his joke. Then he returned to the subject that interested his client the most, her money.

"I know you're always looking for special situations," he said. "But one of these days we should really talk about munis." The word made Felice smirk at Trevin across the table. When Trevin's family had money, they had timidly put it all in the security of municipal bonds, and the city went belly-up. Now Felice was his security.

The dining table had unusual legs and Trevin commented on them. Daria looked at her husband and said:

"Can I show him the secret?"

"Later," Newhall said, a bit testily.

They went out on the enclosed porch after dinner, and a stocky maid cleared the table. When she was done, Daria took Trevin's hand and asked him to follow her. Trevin knew Felice was watching them, although she never moved an eyeball. Felice had great peripheral vision. Daria's husband didn't notice; he was busy talking about puts and calls.

Back in the dining room, Daria went to one end of the table and told Trevin to take the other. Together, they lifted off the unattached top.

"Voilà!" Daria said brightly. There was a craps table underneath. She giggled. "Isn't it adorable? I saw it in an antiques shop and had the top made to fit. Sam hates it. But what fun thing *doesn't* Sam hate?" she asked, in an imploring tone.

After they had admired the craps table for a few minutes, she asked if she could visit the art gallery, promising not to ask for his opinions. He gave her his card, and their fingertips touched. He asked if they shouldn't put the tabletop back on, but Daria shook her head.

"Leave it off. Sam will have an absolute manic fit."

"Is that good?"

"He'll sleep downstairs. *That* will be good."

On the drive home, Felice said, "If you're thinking of having an affair with that woman, forget it. Her husband is a black belt in karate." She laughed to show that it was only levity.

The dinner was on Saturday. On Monday, Daria showed up at the Kenner Gallery and examined the paintings on the wall with solemn interest. Then she asked if he had anything in the back room worth her attention.

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It was a windowless room, so he flicked on the light. She flicked it off and pressed herself against him.

"The minute I saw you two together I knew you wouldn't mind this," she said. "If I'm wrong, tell me right now. I'm not getting any younger."

"Did he sleep downstairs?"

"No," Daria said. "But I did."

Daria kept their assignations with remarkably little trouble. Sam Newhall was a hard-working man, devoted to his clients, and willing to spend long hours at his desk to make sure their portfolios were kept in good repair. Daria had no fixed schedule whatsoever.

As soon as Trevin realized that their relationship would be ongoing, he needed to make some adjustments in his routine. He extended the hours of his part-time assistant, Blaine, and he rented the small utility apartment just above the gallery. He discovered that he was happier in that one room than he was in all eighteen of the rooms in Felice's house.

Happiness made him uneasy. He had grown up in the conviction that life was a series of broken promises. Expensive rugs had been pulled out from under him. His childhood was wealthy, his youth impoverished. He had discovered no work that absorbed him. In his thirties, he had taken bad advice and married well. He lived in a minimum-security prison, and Felice was his jailer.

He found that Daria had very much the same view of her own life. "Worse," she said gloomily. "You're a man, you can get by. And don't give me any feminist baloney, it's still Siberia out there for women like me. I had a face once, I could live on that, but it went away."

He murmured something appropriate, but she wasn't interested in flattery.

"Sooner or later, *this* will go away, too. You'll get nervous about your wife, or maybe it'll dawn on Sam that I'm in the city too often. We'll stop seeing each other, we'll get old, and that's it."

Trevin was badly shaken by her pessimism.

One day he broached the subject of divorce, but she shrugged it off. Her money-clever husband would leave her without a dime. And Felice? It was Trevin's turn to shrug. They had a prenuptial agreement.

* * *

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One weekend, Sam Newhall went on a camping trip and Felice went to a sorority reunion. Trevin and Daria spent two days together. On Sunday night, they got drunk on champagne. Daria looked at him owlishly over the rim of her glass and said: "I'll make you a deal."

"Good," Trevin said. "I love deals."

"This one will scare the pants off you."

"Even better," Trevin said.

"Ready for this? You take care of your wife, I'll take care of my husband."

"Take care?"

"You know."

"Not zackly," Trevin said, and then corrected his pronunciation. "Not exactly," he said carefully. "Although something tells me you mean like get rid of them. Is that what you mean, or am I too drunk to understand?"

She began to giggle helplessly.

"My God, I really think we could do it! I mean, I could anyway. If you knew how close I've come! Once I hit him with a hairbrush. If it had been a hammer I would have crushed his skull! I'm not kidding."

"Prison," Trevin said sententiously. "Fat women in uniform pushing you around. Or maybe the electric chair. Shave your head." He stroked her blond tresses. He took her in his arms and kissed her for a long time. When he was done, she tucked her legs under her and said:

"I know how I'd do my part. I'd hit him with something heavier than a hairbrush. Then I'd take him out to the woods. Did I ever tell you about the time Sam was missing for two days? He went into the woods and didn't come back when he was supposed to. I called the police. He got lost. The big boy scout, he got lost."

"Hey," Trevin said, grinning foolishly.

"Oh, forget it," Daria said. "These things never work out, I know that. We'll end up on one of those TV crime shows. Just forget it, okay?"

"Let's just leave things the way they are," Trevin said. "Can't we do that?"

"No," Daria said flatly. "That's one thing for sure. We can't leave things as they are."

He didn't hear from her for a week, and his anxiety turned into panic. He telephoned her at home, pretending to be looking for her husband. The maid, with a heavy Spanish accent, told him that Mr.

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Newhall, he at his office. When he asked for his wife, the maid said she wasn't there. He began to imagine things.

He drove out to her house one afternoon and parked his car as far as sighting would allow. His surveillance was rewarded. She drove up in a station wagon and began to unload plants from a nursery. He drove by her slowly, leaned out the window.

"What do I have to do to see you again?"

She didn't answer.

The next morning, the phone rang at the gallery, and Blaine handed it to him. It was Daria, who whispered:

"He hit me last night. You should hear what he called me. I think he might have guessed about us."

"What do you want me to do?"

"What I said we should do," Daria whispered. "If I do it—will you? Tell me right now!"

"It's only nine-thirty in the morning!" Trevin said. "I haven't had my coffee yet."

"What has that got to do with it?"

Blaine was looking at him. Luckily, a customer entered. Blaine went to greet her, bowing and scraping. Into the phone, Trevin gritted his teeth and said:

"I don't know if I have the nerve. But if you do—I mean if you can really do it—"

"Are you saying it's a deal?"

Blaine brought the customer to him. She actually wanted to buy a picture.

At dinner that night, Felice seemed bothered by something. When he inquired, she said: "Sam Newhall won't be here tomorrow, and I have these damned IRS people bothering me about some investment tax credit." She tossed an official-looking document at him, but Trevin couldn't make head or tail of it.

"Why can't he come?"

"He's going on one of his camping trips, two weeks he said. His last chance before the cold weather. I'm so upset I could scream! I hate threatening letters from the IRS."

"Who doesn't?"

"I can't wait until he comes back. I'll go see Wickerman in the morning." Wickerman was her attorney. "Can you skip the gallery tomorrow? I'm expecting the upholsterers. All you have to do is

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show them the two couches I want redone. You can handle that, I suppose?"

"I'll stay home," Trevin sighed.

There were three telephone calls the next morning. The first was Felice's mother with her customary nine o'clock whine, insisting on a daughterly visit that weekend. The second was from the upholsterers, postponing the appointment. The third was from Daria, who wisely asked the maid for Mrs. Kenner, accepting her husband instead.

"I called the gallery," she said, her throat sounding constricted. "But I'm glad you're there. You have to come over."

"You don't mean now?"

"I don't mean next week."

"Your husband's left? On that camping trip?"

"He's on his way," Daria said. He could almost see her clenched teeth at the mouth of the receiver.

He drove the ten-mile distance between their neighborhoods at a deliberately slow pace. He listened to the echo of Daria's call in his head, and tried to tag her words with an emotion. The only one that fit was fear.

There was no one at home but Daria. No Spanish maid. Just Daria, waiting for him at the front door, her arms folded. The sunlight bleached her hair and face. A ghost in daylight.

"The garage," she said.

She led him to the back of the house and yanked the garage door upward. The station wagon was inside. She looked at Trevin, and asked him to open the tailgate.

He knew what was under the crumpled canvas tent even before he touched it, which was why he didn't touch it. Daria looked at him in disdain and pulled back enough of the canvas to expose Sam Newhall's stone-grey face. The blood still seemed to be seeping out from one corner of the tarp, spreading out beneath the bulging knapsack, oozing towards the tailgate door. In another few seconds it would be dripping on his shoe, and Trevin, squeamish at the sight of pierced ears, began to retch. Daria slammed the tailgate shut hurriedly and spun him around.

"Stop that!" she said. "If you can't take the sight of blood, use poison or something."

"What?" he said blankly.

"You know damned well *what,*" Daria said. Then she took out a road map and studied it.

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Felice was in a bad mood when she returned that afternoon. Wickerman hadn't been too helpful. He would forestall the IRS, but he would have to confer with Mr. Newhall to decide on the proper course, and Mr. Newhall was playing Daniel Boone for the next two weeks.

When he told her about her mother, and the upholsterers, Felice almost wept with frustration.

"Why does everything have to be so hard?" she said, viciously jamming her mink into the closet between her sable and ermine.

"You need a change," Trevin said. "Maybe a cruise or something."

"You know I get seasick," Felice said. "But there's something else we can do, something we haven't done for a very long time." Trevin winced until she said: "We can go riding! The weather's still good, nice and crisp. Can we do that, Trevin?"

"Of course," he said.

For the second time that day, his mind was filled with an image of woods too dense for sunlight.

Trevin couldn't arrange the riding holiday for another four days, ninety-six of the numbest hours of his life. Felice had to visit her mother first for a briefing on her physical complaints. She also had to upbraid the upholsterers, who showed up and carted away the sofas. Meanwhile, there was no word from Daria, and, of course, no word from her husband, who was incommunicado. Very much so.

Then the day arrived, and the prospect made Felice positively congenial, even lighthearted. In bright autumn sunshine they drove up to Huntersville, home of Meadowlane Farms, where Daria had been riding since girlhood. She was proud of the way she sat a horse, but her early instructors had emphasized ladylike qualities over horsemanship, and she looked better than she rode.

Trevin himself was only a fair rider, not fond of excessive spirit in the animal. At the stable, he chose a chestnut mare of easygoing reputation, but Felice was attracted to a high-stepping American saddle horse named Quicksilver. She also opted for an English saddle, but when she mounted, the loose girth slipped a bit and she almost landed on her backside.

"It's been a few years," Trevin explained to the stablehand. "We're both a little rusty."

"You be careful on that trail then," he offered. "Had a lot of rain last week, might run into a few gullies weren't there before."

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"We'll be careful," Trevin said, more grateful to him than he realized.

They set out together, with Felice in the lead. Her hand wasn't steady on the reins, but Quicksilver didn't seem to care. The horse moved in a sprightly manner, already familiar with the trail. Trevin's mare was content to follow meekly.

In less than half an hour the woods enclosed them. Felice grew more confident, and when the trail widened she asked Quicksilver to canter, leaving Trevin behind. When he caught up with them again, he said:

"I don't like the look of that saddle. I still don't think the girth is tight enough."

He got off his horse and went to make the adjustment. Felice seemed touched.

"It's nice to have you worry about me for a change."

"You'd be surprised how much I worry about you," he said truthfully. Then, making sure the girth was even less secure than before, he mounted his horse again. Quicksilver, anxious to be off, moved his neck from side to side, and then broke into a gallop before Felice could control him. She held on grimly with her thighs, but without a firm grip on the reins there was nothing to do but let him expend his energy. When the saddle suddenly slipped beneath her it was as unsettling as a sudden earthquake. She cried out and vaulted over the animal's head, landing hard on the leafy ground, just barely missing the trunk of an old elm. When Trevin reached her, she was winded, groaning with pain, bruised, but judging from the thrashing movements of her arms and legs, no bones were broken. The only visible blood was on her forehead, where she had scraped off two inches of skin.

She gasped out something, and Trevin, with an agile dismount of his mare, ran to her side. He pulled out his handkerchief and pressed it down on the wound, but in truth he was more interested in creating a blindfold than a bandage. He murmured some words of reassurance, and then, not giving himself time to think, picked up a hefty log some two feet long and struck her on the head with all his strength. He did this several times, but kept no count. Then he hurled the log deep into the woods.

Two weeks after Felice's tragic accident, Sam Newhall still couldn't be reached. To his chagrin, her attorney, Phelps Wickerman, had to organize all the details of Felice Kenner's estate with the help of an

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independent accounting firm. It was annoying, since Newhall seemed to have run every aspect of Felice's finances, and had been reluctant to share the details with anyone else. It took Wickerman days to form a picture, and when he did, he called the grieving husband and said he needed to talk to him.

Trevin came to the lawyer's office. He looked sickly. He had been unable to eat since his wife's death. His eyes were black hollows. They added dignity to his mourning.

"Do we have to do this now?" he asked. "I really don't care about Felice's will."

"I didn't ask you here about the will. The truth is, the will hardly matters now."

Trevin took out a handkerchief and blew his nose. Every movement was careful.

"You don't mean the—prenuptial agreement?"

"No," Wickerman said. "That agreement doesn't affect her will. What affects it is this."

He handed Trevin two sheets of stapled paper. The first page was a copy of a letter to the attorney from the executive of an auditing firm. The second page was full of numbers. He assumed it was the tally of Felice's holdings. What he didn't understand were the minus signs.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

"To put it simply, Felice left virtually nothing. Some real property, but I'm sure it will all have to be sold to meet her debts."

"This doesn't make any sense, Mr. Wickerman."

"Bad investments never make sense, Mr. Kenner. Buying millions of dollars' worth of stock on margin doesn't make sense. Bad advice doesn't make sense. Your wife seems to have taken a great deal of it."

He didn't remember leaving the building. He vaguely recalled taking a taxi to a train station. He was lucky to get off at the right station, and to find the Lexus in the parking lot.

He resisted a natural impulse to make a left-hand turn at the stoplight. Instead, he pointed the car in the direction of Daria's neighborhood.

When he reached their quiet street, he saw the station wagon out front. The tailgate was open, and Daria was loading luggage. There were so many bags already in the rear of the wagon that it seemed impossible to cram in still another, but she managed it. When Sam

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Newhall emerged from the front door, he was carrying still two more.

"Don't worry, don't worry!" he chuckled. "I'll put these on the backseat."

"Even the backseat's filled up," Daria said cheerfully. Then, although he had left his car almost noiselessly, she became aware of Trevin. They were immobilized by the sight of him, but only for a split second. Daria said:

"Hello, Trevin. How nice of you to see us off."

"Heading south," Sam Newhall said. "Mexico, South America, maybe Hawaii. Anyplace that's warm."

Even with all the luggage, even at the distance where he stood, Trevin could see the bright edges of red paint on the hinges of the tailgate.

"They say it's going to be a terrible winter," Daria said.

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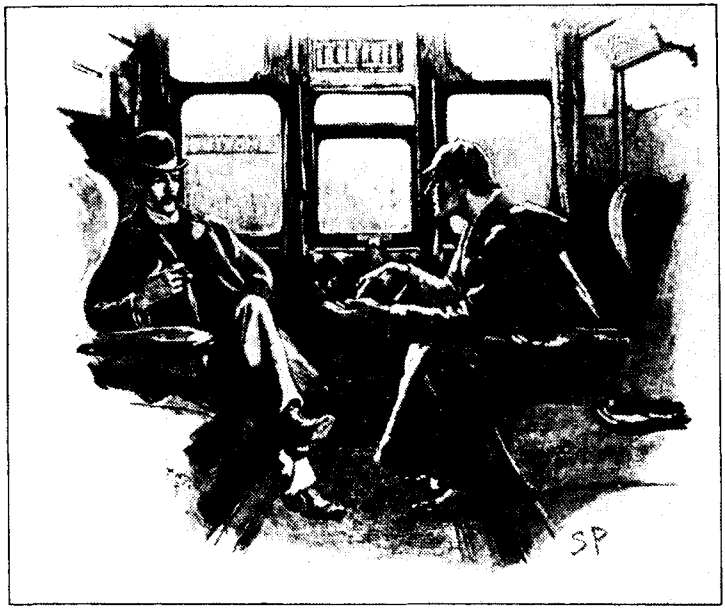

140th Birthday of Sherlock Holmes

On January 7 the Baker Street Irregulars will meet in New York City to celebrate the 140th birthday of Mr. Sherlock Holmes. The yearly dinner in honor of the great sleuth has become a customary occasion for *EQMM* to pay tribute to an organization of which its own founder, Frederic Dannay, was an early member. The Baker Street Irregulars, the first Sherlockian organization in the world, was the brain child of Christopher Morley, who convened its first meeting in 1934, over lunch in New York City. Since then the number of those invested in the B.S.I. has grown to around three hundred, drawn from all over the world.

The organization is a resource to Doyle scholars, serious collectors of Sherlockiana, and others with a devoted interest in the Holmes canon. But the Sherlockians are also out to have fun, and an event guaranteed to provide it is the running of the annual Silver Blaze race at Belmont. The idea of establishing a Silver Blaze purse as a regular feature of the eastern racing season was conceived by Thomas L. Stix, Sr., and the race was run for the first time on April 18, 1952, at Jamaica Race Course on Long Island, in New York. Over the years, B.S.I.s elsewhere have followed suit; by 1992 the purse was established in nearly two dozen other cities.

The famous Sidney Paget drawing reproduced here was an illustration for the original *Strand Magazine* publication of "Silver Blaze." In it Holmes is depicted with his trademark traveling cap, an item sure to be sported when the B.S.I. meets in New York this winter.

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Florida comedienne and comedy writer Jan Carol Sabin debuted in our Department of First Stories in 1991. A longtime resident of New York City, Ms. Sabin moved to Florida in 1980 and has since worked as a manager in the entertainment business and as a publicist for a Florida record company. Her new story takes her back to New York and an episode revolving around the Long Island Railroad . . .

HEADHUNTER

by JAN CAROL SABIN

She whispered. He listened. The shabbily dressed bag lady watched them out of the corner of her eye. They were completely oblivious of her. Only once did the young woman glance at her with penetrating eyes then went back to her conversation with her companion.

The well-dressed man entered the train-station waiting room. He looked at the three people and took a seat. The small room was drafty and the howling night wind pierced the cracks. He drew his overcoat more snugly about him. The couple never glanced his way. The old woman adjusted her torn gloves and looked him over. He hoped she wasn't going to beg money from him. He unfolded the newspaper he had under his arm. Get engrossed in it, he told himself, and he would be left alone.

He read the first page and opened the paper up in front of him, completely absorbed in the story behind the headlines. The young woman glanced over at the crackling of the newspaper being opened. The headline caught her eye. The old woman followed her gaze to the paper: THIRD HEADLESS BODY FOUND.

The man behind the paper was appalled by the story of a maniac beheading his third victim in two months. One man and two women

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decapitated, and their heads never found. Their bodies were found in different locations along the Long Island Railroad tracks. The man noted that each one had left home to travel by train into New York City and had departed late at night from small stations on Long Island such as—this one.

The man finished the story, closed the newspaper, and laid it on the bench next to him. He then looked up at the ashen face of the young woman. Her eyes were fixed on the paper. The young man next to her was staring at him. It was then he noticed the large cooler sitting on the floor next to the couple. His curiosity was aroused. He hadn't seen anyone at this bleak time of year carrying a cooler into the city.

"Going to a party?" he asked. He looked at the cooler and then at the young man, who continued to stare at him, emotionless. "Cold beer in March?" He smiled and shivered.

The young man said nothing and never acknowledged that he had even heard him. A smile played about the corners of the young woman's lips. She leaned forward.

"I wish," she said. "I'm afraid it's only loaded with food sent home with me by my mother. She lives in fear that I'm starving to death as a model in the city. Her weekly trip to my apartment brings the home-baked goods."

The man smiled. He now noticed her fine features and deep-set eyes. She was lovely. Perhaps, he thought, her companion was her live-in lover. He wondered if she would ever consider dating an older man, a stockbroker, like himself.

The bag lady moved her things closer to herself. She rooted down into an overflowing bag of clothes. The man looked at the bag. It had plastic sticking out around the top. It looked as if she had it lined with a plastic garbage bag. He smiled, thinking of the commercial guaranteeing it not to pull apart, imagining the old woman endorsing it with a toothless grin, instead of the soft smile of the attractive model across from him.

"May I see your paper?" asked the young woman. "It's a wonder my mother didn't make my father stay here with me after that headline." Her long fingers nervously tapped her face.

The man smiled. He thought about saying something about her mother knowing she had an escort, but maybe they didn't know he was with her. As he leaned across the small aisle and handed the paper to the woman, he looked at the man beside her.

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The young man was well built. He wore faded jeans, a worn jacket, and workman's shoes. His blond hair needed a good haircut and there was a stubble of beard on his face. The woman was well groomed, dressed in designer clothes: black loose-fitting jogging pants zipped up at the ankles, a heavy, multicolored jacket, and his brand of tennis shoes—expensive. The young man wasn't in her class.

She read for a few minutes and looked up. He saw her glance nervously at the man next to her. She stood and came over to sit next to the older man. She handed him the paper.

"I can't believe there are no clues," she said. "They all rode trains. You would think there would be a police officer stationed here at night. What do you think?"

"I would think so too." He didn't want to disagree with her. His ex-wife said he always took opposite sides with everything anyone said to him. He was like that—she had said.

"All the victims were found on the tracks near a train station," she said. "An officer should be here, right?"

"Exactly," he said, and smiled at her.

"I'm worried about my father," she said quietly. "He has a heart condition. I just thought that maybe he wasn't feeling well, and that's why he didn't wait with me. There's a phone booth outside. I think I'll call home. I've this . . . funny feeling."

She looked at the bag lady and leaned close to him. "I slipped my purse in the cooler when she came in. Would you watch it?" She smiled slightly. "And once in a while look outside to make sure I'm safe?"

He nodded and watched her go outside. A moment later she opened the door and called to him. "I forgot I've no change. Do you have any? I live so close, I should really go home."

The older man searched his coat pocket and found some change. He stood and brought it over to her. He held out the palm of his hand to her. She took the change, and his hand tingled from her touch. She leaned close and whispered.

"I really don't know the man sitting next to me. He arrived when I did. He helped my father bring in my mom's cooler. Now he makes me nervous." She smiled weakly and went back out.

As the man turned to walk back, the old lady started shuffling through her bag. He knew she had been watching them. He glanced at her as he walked past. Something caught his eye in the bag. It

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was the rounded end of a club sticking out of the clothing. He pretended he hadn't noticed.

He sat where he could watch the young woman outside. The young man was staring hard at him with a look of contempt. There was no mistaking it. His heart pounded. He wondered what he would do if the young man decided to go outside. He knew he was no match for him. Then the blond man stood and looked towards the door. Through the glass window in the door, they both saw the woman leave the booth.

The young man moved quickly. He was out the door and almost reached the woman, but she dashed back into the booth and closed the door. The phone-booth light shone on her as she desperately pressed her hands against the door, trying to hold it against the intruder. The girl looked frantically towards the train station. The older man broke into a cold sweat. The bag lady was just sitting and staring at the couple.

He took advantage of the bag lady looking outside. He moved quietly, reached down into her bag, and pulled the club out. He held the club behind him as he ran outside.

"Getting excited, Pop?" the young man said, looking at him. "Want a piece of the action, or do you just want to watch?" He laughed sarcastically and turned back to push on the door.

There was the sound of a thud as the club caught the young man on the head. He groaned and fell. The man dropped the club. "Oh God," he said, "let me not have killed him."

Then the woman was at his side, grabbing onto his arm. "I was so scared." Her voice quivered. "Is he dead?"

"No, thank goodness. He just moved."

She began trembling. "Please, let's get out of here and get the police."

"You phone the police, and I'll watch him."

"I can't," she cried. "Something is wrong with the phone. I couldn't get a dial tone. We have to get away from here."

He looked at the station door. Through the glass he saw the bag lady watching them. A cold shiver ran through him. The man on the ground began to moan.

"How close do you live from here?" he asked.

"Our house is across the tracks," she said. "But I have to get Mom's cooler. I slipped my wallet under the packages. Oh no, he's moving!"

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He looked down. The man on the ground rolled on his side, moaning, and his jacket opened. There was a leather sheath on his belt. "He's carrying a knife. You head for your house. I'll get the cooler and follow. Hurry!"

The girl gasped and ran. He watched her go past the platform and start across the tracks. He hurried into the station, lifted the heavy cooler, and headed past the bag lady. He turned at the door and looked back at her. She stood tall and straight. She seemed to transform before him. And her eyes . . . They weren't the eyes of an old lady. They were alert, cold and bright. Now he knew the truth.

He ran in the direction the young woman had gone. He knew without looking back that he was being pursued. He crossed the tracks. The woman was waiting anxiously for him.

"I was so worried. Thank goodness you're safe," she said.

"We can't stop," he said. "We have to keep going."

"Let me help carry the cooler," she said, grabbing one handle. Before he could protest, the lid swung off and she bent down. As she stood a shot rang out, and the girl dropped. He turned and froze at the sight of the figure in the middle of the tracks. In the moonlight he could see the bag lady clearly, standing there holding a gun, and it was pointing at him.

"Steady, mister," said the bag lady in a deep voice. "Stand still. Now look down at the woman."

Numbly he followed the instructions. The young woman was lying still. He knew she was dead. The front of her jacket was soaked with blood. He felt sick inside. Then he saw the large knife in her hand. He stared dumbfounded at it.

"I don't understand," he stammered.

"That's a machete in her hand, and you just missed being decapitated. She pulled it out of the cooler before I fired. She was so intent on killing you, she never saw me."

The man stood there in the cold wind and watched the bag lady shed her tattered clothes to reveal a masculine body in a sweater and jeans. It was as he had suspected in the station. The bag lady was a man, only now he was showing him a shield.

"I'm Detective Zimbrosky of the Suffolk County Special Investigation Task Force. We've been covering five railroad stations, waiting for this vicious killer's next attack. My partner is phoning it in now. He was hiding near the booth."

"I don't understand . . . What about her father?"

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"There was no father. She arrived with the cooler alone. The blond guy, a drifter, came in later. I heard them whispering. She made a big play for him before you arrived, that's why he went after her. She counted on you to rescue her. She knew the drifter and bag lady—me—would take off at the first sign of police. No witnesses."

"Why did she do it? Why me and those other people?"

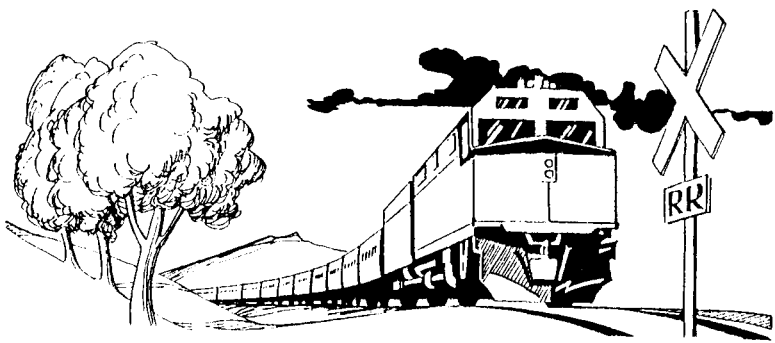
"What the paper didn't say was that expensive jewelry had been taken from each victim, like your ring and watch, plus their wallets with all those credit cards. Like yours."

"Why the . . . heads?" He had to ask it.

"No head, no wallet, takes longer to identify. But I suspect with her, it could have been an added thrill."

"What do you think happened to the—heads?"

The detective bent down and examined the large cooler. "I heard her whispering to the young man that he should see her sculptures. We have, weighing down this cooler, a box of plaster of Paris and a container of water. Mix it, and it hardens fast. . . . I imagine she did nice work with her long fingers."



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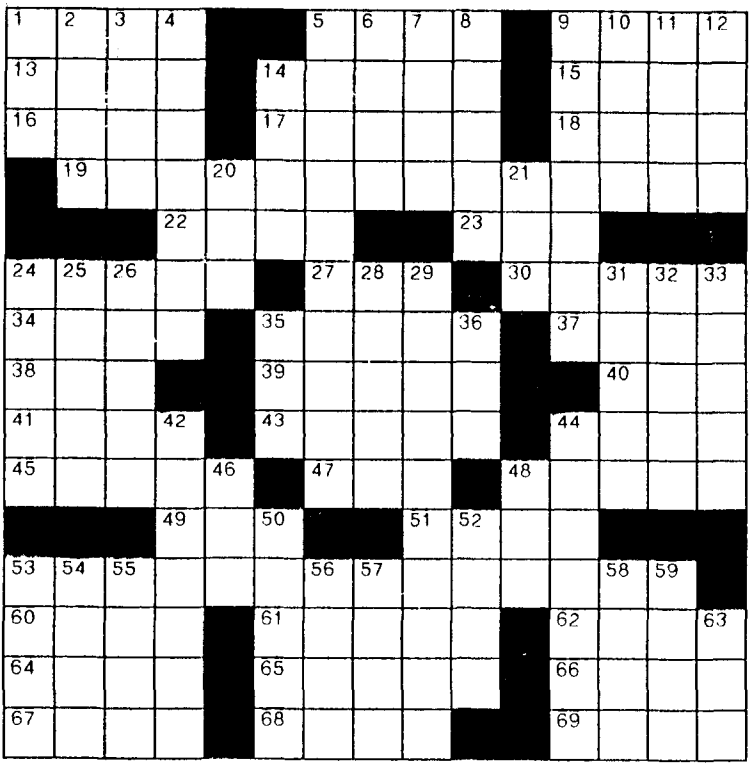
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Alan Penick



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1 Fiction alternative
5 Seaport north of Haifa
9 Scorch or sear
13 Glacial ridges
14 Irish runic language
15 Abhor or detest
16 Dry: Comb. form
17 Memorable battleship
18 Literary conflict
19 Mystery novel by 29D in which 5D and 53A meet
22 Hindu sect
23 Day, in Spanish
24 1992 Kauai hurricane

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27 Grain bristle
30 Real first name of Mystery writer in 29D
34 Bug or finger lead-in
35 Put on a play
37 Director Kazan
38 Uganda's —— Amin Dada
39 Of an Indo-European
40 Epistle: Abbr.
41 —— *Misbehavin'*
43 Gin companion
44 Very strong wind
45 Fear greatly
47 Nav. enl. rank
48 Distributes (with out)
49 Dr. for Garfield
51 Principal or leading
53 Detective in novels by 29D
60 Month of Purim
61 Drive —— bargain
62 Nautical canvas
64 Musical, —— *Yankees*
65 Dustin Hoffman role
66 *Winnie* —— *Pu*
67 Stadium for the NY Mets
68 Literary collection: Abbr.
69 Tallow source

DOWN

1 Inspector ——, assistant to 53A
2 On the briny
3 Mystery author John Dickson ——
4 Leading Bolshevik banished in 1929
5 Painter in novel (19A) who marries 53A
6 Psi preceeders
7 Wife of a Raja
8 Edit or revise
9 Blatant pretense
10 Holy: Comb. form
11 Small energy source
12 Coty or Descartes
14 Russian city on the Irtysh
20 Cube root of XXVII
21 Co., in France
24 Homeric epic
25 Apex antonym
26 Organic chemical suffix
28 Hockey's Gretzky
29 Mystery author born in Christchurch, N.Z.
31 —— ease (uncomfortable)
32 Descriptive appellation
33 Genus Lepus individuals
35 Posed for a portrait
36 Abbr. on an envelope
42 Greek restaurant
44 Book before Exodus
46 "—— Rosenkavalier"
48 Wire diameter measure
50 Papal crown
52 Actor —— Ray
53 Harmful nuclear units
54 Harem room (var.)
55 Title with 29D's O.B.E.
56 Detective Charlie ——
57 Actor William —— who played Paul Drake, Jr.
58 Asian border river
59 Blue or White river
63 Tennis cry

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DETECTIVERSE

CHEEP TRICK

by KATHERINE H. BROOKS

He rested on a pile of leaves,
beside his tape recorder,
Reflecting on the fact that he
had killed a man—to order.

A killing's such a horrid thing—
he'd done it for the money,
But guilt will often battle greed,
and consciences are funny.

The birds were singing all around,
unmindful of his sorrow.
He felt an urge to tape the sound—
for cheering up, tomorrow.

He saw her, as he flicked the switch;
she'd come to do the paying,
A bag of booty in her arms,
as promised, for the slaying.

"You killed my husband?" asked the wife.
"I did." He felt a shiver.
"I stabbed him with a hunting knife,
and dumped him in the river."

She reached beneath the bag without
a trace of grateful feeling,
And shot him dead—a classic case
of callous double-dealing.

He fell among the leaves, where once
he'd heard the sparrows cheep.
She hid his form, and left him there—
a human compost heap.

Perchance a startled passer-by
will find recorded words
That solve a crime—and never know
the tape was for the birds.

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"I wrote 'Voices,'" says author Barbara Callahan, "because I have always wondered about the effect of witnessing the murder of a family member (which sadly happens all too often today) on a child." Ms. Callahan's reflections resulted in a penetrating story, her first for EQMM *since 1983 . . .*

VOICES

by BARBARA CALLAHAN

My father always stood beside me on the carousel as I rode the most gallant steed, the one with the light blue saddle and the mane of pink roses. Daddy named the horse Merlin after the wizard in King Arthur's court and told me that Merlin had done such a good job of warning the court of dangers that Arthur wanted to reward him. "Since Merlin loved children," Daddy said, "Arthur let him change himself into a carousel horse and give rides to beautiful children like my Alicia throughout the ages."

Mother never went with us to the carousel. Wednesday afternoons at four o'clock were our special father-daughter times, the times when State Senator Salvator Messaro faithfully kept an appointment with his five-year-old daughter. On Wednesday, June 22, 1976, Merlin looked especially handsome, as if someone had buffed his white coat with a sun-drenched cloth. Daddy looked handsome too, and he was in fine voice as he sang along to the carousel music, "In the good old summertime, in the good old . . ."

"Summertime, Daddy," I prompted, turning toward my gallant knight, who was sliding, sliding away from me to the floor of the carousel, his fingers momentarily gripping Merlin's stirrup before he fell into the dirt that ringed the carousel. The song played on and on, and the carousel went round and round, and people screamed and screamed. I dismounted Merlin to help my father. I thought he had taken a deep breath to sing and got dizzy like I did sometimes when I held my breath on purpose. But a lady grabbed me before I could jump, and as I tried to push her away, my arm brushed against Merlin's white coat, which had a sticky red spot on it. I got some of

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that red stuff on my arm and I just stood and looked at it as the carousel wound down and the lady kept saying, "Oh, you poor kid, you poor kid."

Nobody let me near my father and nobody listened when I hollered at the ambulance people to put Daddy on Merlin. "Merlin's magic," I shouted, "Merlin will make him better." A tall policewoman picked me up and made comforting noises. Looking over her shoulder, I saw a man on the ground. The ticket collector had tackled him, and some men held him until the police came. The policemen were not handling him gently like the ambulance men were handling my father. They pulled the man to his feet, and he smirked at the screaming crowd. Two policemen shoved him against a patrol car.

From the brief view I had of the man's face, I realized I had seen him before—in a storybook. He was Weasel, the sly, thin-faced pest who came uninvited in *Mouse Family's Picnic* and positively glowed because he had ruined their fun.

Weasel, aka Warren Rudeker, did not smirk in the photo that appeared several weeks ago in the Wednesday *Times*. In the seventeen years since his sentencing at the age of thirty-five, his face had lost the predatory alertness of his younger self, the self ever attentive to orders from the voices that had commanded him to shoot my father. Weasel claimed that Tom Paine, Patrick Henry, and Paul Revere had ordered him to rid the nation of a legislator who supported tax increases for various projects. Two months ago, a team of mental-health professionals had certified Weasel voices-free and, therefore, no threat to society. He had been assigned to a halfway house from which he would commute to his job as a lab technician.

When I saw the photo, I sat staring at it for a long time, wondering if the weasely cunning still existed behind his eyes or if it had been displaced by a therapy-induced remorse. Did the voices ever really leave, or did they merely become harder to hear? Would Warren Rudeker strain his fifty-one-year-old ears to hear whisperings from long ago? Could one of the voices be lying low, having triumphed over all the drugs that had been pumped into his host's body and be waiting to command him to kill again, to kill another politician? My mother, perhaps?

My mother holds a seat in the state senate. She waited until five years after my father's death to run, believing then that I was strong enough to stand it. I had given her a hard time after my last ride on the carousel, manifesting the usual posttraumatic stress symptoms: sleeplessness, loss of appetite, crying spells, and clinging to the sur-

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viving parent. And I had created a fairly original disorder, a fascination with Father's grave site.

Several times a week, I begged my mother to take me to Father's grave. Although the frequent visits pained her, she agreed, hoping that the trips reinforced the reality of the event and would help to dispell the dreams I had of Father chatting with me during the night, then leaving in the morning. Those dreams triggered massive crying attacks.

Actually, those trips to the grave were excursions into unreality. They were a five-year-old's strategy sessions, opportunities for me to visualize how to make a replacement for the gray stone on top of my father and how to perform the substitution. When we knelt before the stone, I made plans. On the night of the fifth visit, I kissed my mother after dinner and told her I could put myself to bed. She looked surprised and somewhat pleased, thinking perhaps that some of my clingingness had vanished. Upstairs, I made bathtub noises, then tramped into my bedroom before stealing down the backstairs to the kitchen to leave the house by the back door.

At the subway station, I waited until the cashier was giving someone directions before ducking under the turnstiles so she wouldn't see that I was alone. Since Father and I had come this way many times, I knew how to go. At the Huntingdon stop, I got off and walked the two blocks to the park. The carousel's lights shone through the trees. When I got closer, I saw Merlin and clapped my hands. I had been so afraid that the carousel owners had removed him because of the ugly red spot on his side, and if they had, my plan would have been ruined. Other children climbed on and off Merlin, but I wasn't jealous. He was only doing his job.

I sat down on the ground behind a trash can to wait. When the music stopped and the lights went out, I waited a few more minutes until the children and their parents left before boarding the still carousel. Although I heard someone whistling not too far from me, someone who was cleaning the carousel, I wasn't afraid that he would chase me away. My business with Merlin would not take long. Happily, I hugged him and whispered in his ear, "You're a magician, Merlin. Fly away with me. Take me to Daddy. It was my fault he died. I didn't let you protect him then, but you can now. Kick over that ugly gray stone and let him out."

When Mother came to the police station to get me, I forgot my disappointment with Merlin. She looked so tired, too tired even to scold me. On the way home, she listened to my story and commented

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wearily, "Alicia, there is no magic." But she was wrong. I had magic and I used it to erase the tiredness from her face. I stopped calling for her in the middle of the night and I stopped begging for visits to the cemetery. I ate my food and didn't complain when she went out and left me with Nora, the housekeeper. The thought that possibly Weasel, Father's killer, had a little girl empowered me to stop directing my pain to my mother. I put myself to sleep at night imagining her face as a miniature of Weasel's. I vowed that someday I'd find her and drag her to the park and tie her onto a carousel horse, not Merlin, of course, and shoot her. Through the years her face changed, somehow taking on the features of the least popular girls in my class.

In junior high, when I learned about microfiche, I went to the library to check newspapers for photos and articles about the day my father was shot because I couldn't find any at home. Perhaps a picture of Weasel's little girl would be in one of them and I could project a teenaged face onto hers. On the fiche, I saw myself cradled in the policewoman's arms, a photo I had never seen because Mother and I had entered into a silent agreement on the way home from the police station never to refer to the tragedy. When I found the articles, I was dismayed to see that there were no pictures of Weasel's family. In fact, the article stated that Weasel had only an aunt and no other relatives. He was not married.

I believe it was on the day I learned there was no Miss Weasel that I started carving carousel horses in the shop classes girls were allowed to take. My teacher loved them and told me I had real talent. He wanted to feature them in the school's annual crafts show, but I refused. Mother always came to the show and I didn't want her to know I had broken our silent agreement by obsessing with an object related to Father's death.

Mother also doesn't know about the purchase I made last year after graduating from art school and moving into my own apartment. With some of the money left me by my grandmother, I bought Merlin. I had read in the newspaper that the carousel owners were retiring the horses of my childhood and offering them for sale. Merlin now lives in the foyer of my apartment. He is a favorite of all my friends, who greet him warmly and stroke his rosy mane. It pains me that I cannot show him to Mother, that I make excuses always to go home for special occasions and don't invite her to my place for any of them. I just don't want to worry her. I want her to

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continue to believe that I have come completely out of the shadows cast long ago by the events of that summer day.

When I read about the allegedly new, voices-free Weasel, I debated for a while whether or not to call Mother. Finally I decided that expressing concern for her well-being would not violate our silent agreement.

"Mother, have you seen the *Times?*"

"Yes, I have," she answered, waiting for me to name the story. I could picture her nibbling on her thumbnail, the only gesture that ever betrayed her patrician composure.

"Do you believe he's cured?" I asked.

"I'll have to believe the experts," she answered.

"Mother, I'm worried about you."

"Me? Why?"

"You're a Messaro, you're a politician, you also voted for some tax increases. He very well could have followed your career in the newspapers over the years. His so-called voices could be directing him to kill you."

"Darling, the professionals don't think so."

Suddenly I realized that she had had foreknowledge of Weasel's release, that as a courtesy, the "professionals" had let her know.

Testily I asked, "Why didn't you tell me?"

She sighed. "Because I wanted you to have a few worry-free days before finding out. I knew this would affect you deeply."

I wanted to shout that I hadn't had a worry-free day since June 22, 1976, but I didn't. Instead I asked if she'd consider hiring a bodyguard.

"Alicia, I'm not going to let my life be ruled by a pathetic little man who's no longer a threat to me or to anyone else. No bodyguard."

There was no use trying to persuade her. Mother made her decisions quickly, and most of the time they were right, but not this one. Merlin didn't think so either. I brought my dinner into the foyer and sat next to him as I ate. The vibrations he gave off were very negative.

When I finished eating, I patted Merlin's shiny coat. "It's up to me to protect Mother, Merlin. I've got a plan. I'm going to do a loopback on Weasel; you know, a loopback—that sly animal trick of getting behind an enemy. I'll follow him and see that he doesn't go near Mother. I'll put my freelance assignments on hold for a while."

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Located in a nonresidential section of the city, the halfway house stood forlornly next to a warehouse and a parking garage. A park across the street from the house added color to the somber scene. I parked on the street next to a clearing in the park so that I'd have a clear view of the house. On the first day of Weasel's residence there, I studied his face through binoculars. He squinted at the early morning sun as if he had just come out of a cave. He tugged at the lapel of his polyester jacket as he moved tentatively toward the van that took him and his four companions to their jobs. Pale and stocky, he lacked the arrogance of the assassin I had seen slammed up against the patrol car.

For a moment, I replayed Mother's voice saying that he was no longer a threat, and I considered shelving my plan, but then I remembered Father's voice telling me to finish what I had started. I could almost hear him telling me to color all the dwarfs in my Snow White coloring book, not just five of them.

Weasel's life and mine quickly settled into a routine. I followed the van in the morning, parked my car next to an empty lot across from the lab, and waited all day. Weasel did not leave the building for lunch. I brought mine with me, along with a sketch pad to relieve the monotony. At five, the van picked Weasel up for the ride back to the halfway house. At that time, I went off duty. Nobody left the house in the evening.

On the first weekend, Weasel came out only once to walk in the park. Actually, he shuffled more than walked, as if attached to a chain gang. Anyone watching him, except me, might have pitied him, believing him to be a person carrying more than his share of life's burdens.

On the second weekend, he went to the park on Saturday and to church on Sunday. When I saw him mount the steps of the stately Gothic-like building, I wanted to shout "Sacrilege." I took a seat three pews behind Weasel and experienced a strange thrill at being that close to him. He knelt reverently, his head bowed, as if praying for forgiveness—a pose that had to be all sham to deceive the halfway-house worker who accompanied him.

A voice intruded on my thoughts. "Now, now, Alicia," my father had said years ago, "you must forgive your little friend. She didn't mean to break your doll. God doesn't want us to hate anyone." Then Father updated his message. "Now, now, Alicia, you must forgive Warren Rudeker. He was sick when he shot me. I forgive him and you must too." Aloud, I responded to Father's admonition, "Weasel,

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Daddy, his name is Weasel." When the woman in front of me turned around, I pretended I was saying my rosary.

The scene in church didn't upset me nearly so much as the one I witnessed on a beautiful Saturday in June. It had been a month since his release to the halfway house, and he walked out of the building and into the park like someone who deserved to be blessed by the sun. He was no longer the furtive creature whose chains to his past had hobbled his steps. I didn't like the change in him, but I'm sure the voices did. The voices must have been cheering the return of the old Weasel, the one strong enough to do their bidding.

Before I left my car, I remembered Mother's comment when I suggested he might come after her. "Alicia," she said, "I'm not going to let my life be ruled by a pathetic little man who's no longer a threat to me or anyone else." I laughed. "Pathetic, Mother? Hardly. The pathetic act was strictly for the professionals. He's standing up straight now, revealing the strength that's always been there. But don't worry, I'll change him back to the sniveling Weasel he was a month ago." I imagined I heard Mother say, "Don't," but I'm a big girl now, no longer subject to obeying parental voices.

Weasel was several yards away from me when I sat down on a park bench and started to sketch a child on a carousel horse. The path he followed led directly past my bench. It was very important that I see him up close and establish eye contact because only then could I be assured of my dominance. He stopped to pick a violet, then put it in his lapel. A small smile creased his pasty face, and his step became almost jaunty. "Foul," cried a voice inside me, the voice of my soccer coach who had used the word to describe any inappropriate behavior. It was foul that Weasel could pick a flower when my father couldn't.

When Weasel reached the bench, I deliberately dropped my pen in front of him. As he leaned to pick it up, the violet escaped from his lapel, leaving him bereft of any humanizing ally. I smiled. Shyly, he handed me the pen without looking at me.

"Why thank you," I said sweetly, "would you like to see my sketch?"

Forced to reply, he looked into my eyes, then quickly shifted his focus to the sketch pad.

"Okay, miss," he said in a voice raw from damaged vocal cords. I remembered reading on the fiche that he had been stabbed in the throat by an inmate who had once been helped by my father.

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I handed him the sketch of the little girl on the carousel. I had given her my five-year-old face, hoping that Weasel would remember the child who had tried to jump off the carousel to save her father.

"Very nice," he said, without giving any sign of recognition. He handed it back to me, then tipped his broad-brimmed, fifties-style Panama hat in farewell. As he walked quickly away from me, I rejoiced because I had made him feel uncomfortable. Prison life must have made him wary of unexpected encounters.

I was about to crumple the sketch and throw it into a trash can when I remembered the waste not/want not chidings of Nora, our housekeeper. I put the sketch on the passenger seat of my car, sure that I'd find a use for it—perhaps as a greeting card for Weasel. Yes. I smiled. I'd send it to him with no explanation and no signature. He'd make the connection between the sketch and the young woman in the park, but he'd be deeply puzzled as to why I had sent it. Would he think it a thoughtful gesture from an eccentric artist who for an unknown reason had been watching him and knew his name and where he lived? And finding that explanation too bizarre, would he allow the little girl on the carousel horse to break out of confinement in the dark recesses of his memory to tantalize him into reliving the day he shot Father? Would he do some math and conclude that the carousel child was now the carousel woman? Of course he would.

On the way to the post office to mail the sketch to Weasel, I heard Mother's voice over and over again. She kept saying, "You're not doing this for me, Alicia. Your rationale for following Warren Rudeker was to protect me. He's been out for over a month and has made no attempt to get near me. This pursuit of him is for your own grim satisfaction. This is not what your father would want and not what I want either. I've lost my husband and I don't want to lose my daughter."

"Mind your own business, Mother," I hissed as I sealed the padded envelope and took it to the counter. "First-class mail," I commanded.

The day after I sent the sketch to Weasel, he came into the park, holding the drawing. As I sat in the car enjoying his fear, I sketched him as a caricature—I gave him a weasel body and weasel ears and his own weasel face contorted with fear. In his paw, he clutched the drawing of the girl on the carousel. He paced up and down looking for me. It was fun seeing his agitation and not feeling any myself.

Aloud, with no danger of his hearing me, I said, "I sent you the drawing, Weasel, and you are afraid of me. You loved the power of

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stalking my father before you killed him, but you don't like being stalked. I like stalking you, Weasel. I feel so powerful."

"That's a sinful thought, Alicia," chided the voice of Sister Therese, my third-grade teacher, who intruded on my afternoon of Weasel-watching. I tried to ignore her, but she kept repeating, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." I remembered the day she taught us those words. I was the only one in the class who could define the word trespass.

When at last Weasel stopped looking for me and sat wearily down on a bench, he once again trespassed against me by stuffing my sketch into his pocket. No artist can bear to see her work pawed by a Philistine. He was worthy of no more artwork. That night I took a color Polaroid photo of Merlin, who bared his teeth more than usual when I told him I was sending it to Weasel. Two days later, I took another photo to send to Weasel. Merlin was quite understanding when I smeared his side with catsup.

That small touch of simulating blood on Merlin's side silenced the voices of Mother, Father, and Sister Therese. Apparently they believed that I was being fair to my prey, that the sketch and photos served as warnings to him.

From my observation post next to the park, I noticed that the second photo had shaken him considerably. He walked slowly into the park as if he didn't deserve to be there. He squinted in the sunlight like he did on the first day he came into the park. He sat down heavily on the bench by the entrance. The weasel had become a weary mouse, conditioned to accept defeat, not even bothering to look for his predator. His pathetic aura of resignation amused me.

"Where are the voices of yesteryear, Weasel?" I taunted in the privacy of my car. "They're not telling you what to do now, are they? They've abandoned you. You won't be happy to know that I've gotten rid of my nuisance voices, the ones advising forgiveness. I listen to only one voice now, a voice from long ago, the voice of a kind lady who held me on the carousel on the day you killed Father. I will do what she tells me, but I need to toy with you for a while. Predators do that, you know."

I replaced the visual attack on Weasel with an aural attack. After dialing the number of the halfway house and asking for Warren Rudeker, I put a music box next to the phone. The music box played "In the Good Old Summertime," the song that became an unlikely dirge for my father as he fell from the carousel. The gasp I heard from Weasel when he heard the music over the phone confirmed my

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suspicion that he remembered the song. He had probably timed his shot for a certain part of the song. On the next two times that I called and played the song, he listened quietly. He did not hang up or ask questions. He knew who was calling.

On June 22, 1993, Weasel did not leave the halfway house. I believe he feared receiving a seventeenth-anniversary remembrance from me. Actually, I hadn't planned one because I wanted him to let down his guard. For the next three weeks, I did nothing but sit unnoticed in my car and watch him. The long respite from my attacks gave Weasel a false sense of security. He stopped shuffling and looking over his shoulder. He even picked a few wildflowers on the next-to-the-last day of his life.

Although I detested his defiling the flowers, I didn't make my move then because I hoped he might do something more outrageous that would make it easy for me to do what I had to do. On the next day, he obliged me. After strolling into the park and stopping to watch a father-son game of catch, Weasel picked up the ball that the child missed, handed it to the boy, then patted him on his curly blond head. How dare he touch a child! His action was so outrageous that none of the voices that had started pestering me again spoke up. Touching the child was the signal I had been waiting for.

Almost jauntily, Weasel passed the father and son on his way to the labyrinth at the far end of the park. Quickly, I left the car, climbed over the low retaining wall next to the hedges, and moved into the thicket of high rhododendron bushes that flanked the interior of the maze. When Weasel came within three feet of my hiding place, I cranked the handle of the toy I had brought with me. When the tinkly music started to play, Weasel stopped. He looked puzzled, but not yet afraid, and I needed him to be afraid. I stepped out of the bushes to let him see the clown spring up from the jack-in-the-box in my hand. He looked down at the musical toy I held in my left hand, then up at me, and fear clouded his face. To the tune of "Pop Goes the Weasel," I shot him.

Merlin didn't smile when I told him about shooting Weasel to the tune of "Pop Goes the Weasel." I was disappointed because I thought he'd enjoy the dark humor. The voices didn't appreciate my little joke either. Mother moaned, "Oh Alicia." Father whispered, "Oh my God." Sister Therese called me a sinner. Only the kind woman on the carousel approved of what I had done, and hers was the only voice that had mattered over the past month. When the kind woman held me to keep me from jumping off the carousel after Father had

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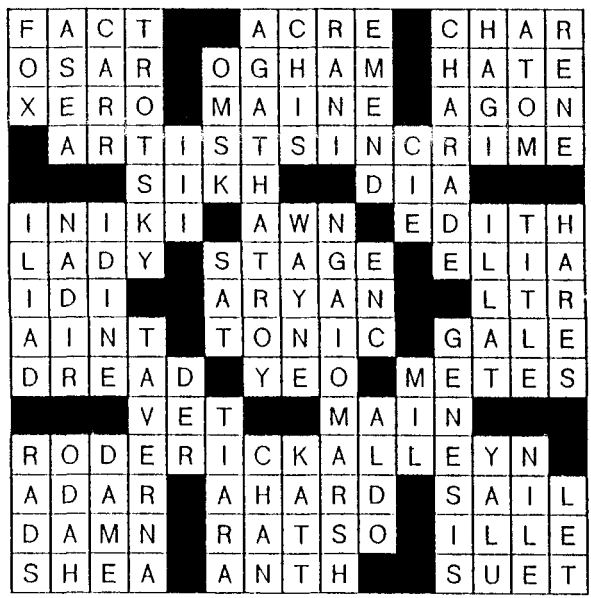
been shot, she had said, "Oh, you poor kid, you poor kid."

But she had also said something else that I remembered so well. When the police were wrestling Weasel to the ground, she had shouted, "Kill him, kill him." On the day I shot Weasel, the carousel woman said to me, "Nice job, Alicia." It was good to hear that from her, but it upset me that the people I cared about most didn't approve. I needed to be cheered up, so I played the music box and started to sing, "In the good old . . ."

"Wintertime, Alicia, wintertime," whispered Mother, Father, and Sister Therese.

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD



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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT TWOHY

In a 1980 interview for EQMM, *Robert Twohy had this to say about humor in fiction: "I don't strive for it. If I make an effort it shows and there goes the fun. I try to be receptive to humor—if it comes out of the story. If it doesn't, it probably doesn't belong there and I'd make a mistake trying to lay it in." The fun shines through in this new Twohy story, which is as unusual a crime tale as we've yet come across . . .*

WOMAN IN A DOORWAY WAVING

by ROBERT TWOHY

"What's that?" Tall, rough-cut man about forty is gazing out bedroom window, thin brown eyes fixed on something.

His host comes over on his right, looks out, sees only grass, back patio, trimmed hedges rear and sides, brick walkway circling around. No birds are on lawn at moment.

Tall man wears old brown jacket, sport shirt, grey workpants, plain black shoes.

In the bed on her back lies a red-haired woman. Sheet and light blue blanket halfway down show neat narrow hands loosely folded on her stomach. Lips are apart and eyes closed.

Host asks what tall man sees, gets back murmur, "Possible footprint." Host doesn't see relevance in current situation but before can frame question, tall man has twisted cam and thrown old-style window all the way up, turned himself one hundred eighty degrees, and dropped fit-looking butt onto windowsill.

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For two seconds he sits still. Then, swiveling left, he swings bent legs and feet out window while hunching head and shoulders under sash and outside. Butt now aims in.

Time is 9:07 A.M. Sunday, April 16. Place is rear bedroom of ranch-style house in nice district of Ojai, California, stylish town two miles inland from Ventura, seat of county of same name. Man in window is Deputy Sheriff Farlen Foxx, on a routine call at Ojai PD when at 8:11 his host, Peter Miller, phoned there.

Miller owns successful furniture mart in Ventura. He's fifty-three, small with pudgy features. A few strands of white hair band his round pink scalp. Eyes are mild blue. He wears soft yellow slippers, undershorts, and an old green bathrobe.

Woman in bed is Vestra Boylan, who was living with Miller until sometime close to midnight last night, according to Dr. Wegel of Ventura, friend of Miller who has come and gone, as have two Ojai policemen.

Pale streaks across grey sky suggest that rains of last three days and nights are over. Broad lawn has plump, satisfied demeanor. Three birds have arrived suddenly and are jumping around pecking.

Deputy Foxx pushes off sill with legs rigid so heels drive into soft grass beneath. Stepping out of the grooves across walkway, he strides straight out across lawn, followed by line of fresh brown dents.

About twenty put him near rear hedge, where he stands gazing down at whatever. Then with a shrug he turns and starts back.

Miller calls to suggest walkway, adding that at backdoor on patio are a mat and a footscraper. But as he's not forceful person his call lacks force, maybe not reaching Foxx, who comes back along line of dents, deepening some and adding some fresh ones.

At window he grips sill and thrusts long hard body straight up, right knee swinging out and forward to land on sill. Putting weight on it and both palms, he forwards head and upper torso into bedroom as raises left leg.—But too much of him is in too soon and he drops fast and hard onto pearl-grey rug, butt up and legs and feet out window.

Some seconds pass. He lies not moving. Miller asks if he's all right. Foxx mumbles something, lifts and shakes head fast a few times, then elbow-crawls forward for space to lower butt, knees, then feet, which track two wide grassy mudstripes down silver-papered wall under window.

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He gets himself up gradually, works his jaw a few seconds with left hand, then mutters, "Only a shadow. Often after a storm you imagine footprints."

Miller looks at the line of brown gouges across the otherwise complacent-looking lawn. Two more birds have landed.

The deputy walks around shooting narrow glances at the woman in bed, who wears a yellow nightgown with pink ruffles at neck and shoulders.

Miller says that if he'll get off his muddy shoes, Miller will have the maid clean and brush them dry. He gets no answer. Foxx has stepped to the woman and is bent, smelling her lips. Nodding, he straightens and steps back. "Who found her?"

"As I told you and the policemen, Fanette the maid."

"Time?"

"About eight o'clock, when she brought her her morning cocoa. She got me and I phoned right away." He's told that too.

"Fanette lives here?"

"Yes."

"And you said someone else?"

"Chun Hing, the cook."

"And you."

"Yes." Miller has lived here thirty-eight years.

The deputy has a five-by-three-inch spiral notebook with a green cover. "Bring them one after the other."

Miller doesn't see point as didn't re possible footprint. But he thinks that quicker Foxx completes whatever he's doing and goes, the sooner life will get normal.

He walks down hall past a parked gurney to the kitchen where the cook is fixing a second or possibly third pot of coffee for white-smocked men at the table. Their cream-colored hearse is in front in the driveway, as is Foxx's old blue Olds wagon. Miller's silver-grey Honda is in the two-car port. Chun Hing and Fanette don't have cars or driver's licenses as Vestra Boylan didn't in the time she lived here.

Miller beckons with a finger and the cook follows him back to the silvery bedroom. Miller steps aside. Foxx fixes thin brown eyes on the cook, who stands calm and passive. Foxx says quietly, "You were having an affair with this woman, weren't you?"

Miller is stunned. He considers the remark in outstanding bad taste. He opens mouth to say so, but doesn't because Hing has nodded and Foxx is putting another question—"Had it gone sour?"

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Hing nods.

"Isn't it a fact that you were in this room shortly before midnight last night?" Hing nods. "And can I assume you're familiar with a particularly deadly Asian toxic called Sheng-Fi, that leaves no odor or trace?" Hing nods.

With a blue ballpoint the deputy is noting in his book. He says to Miller, "Now bring the other." Miller goes for the other. Hing goes back to the kitchen.

Alone in the bedroom with the still woman, Foxx studies her. Bright reddish hair is rubber-banded into numerous neat tufts. Complexion is clear, attitude is serene. Visible are no cuts, lumps, bruises, or any subtler indications of foul or other kind of play.

He looks up as small chubby woman in a robe of many bright colors, with fervent dark eyes and wafting waves of fine black hair, comes flurrying in, Miller behind her.

The deputy, eyeing her thinly, murmurs, "You were in this room about midnight last night, is that not so?"

"Fanette." Her glance moves from mudlines down wall and stains on rug to his shoes. Quick palm to her lips blocks most but not all of a giggle.

Foxx says quietly, "This may be a matter not for light laughter."

Fervid eyes go wide and lips clamp shut.

"Did you bear malice because her passion for Chun Hing you share? Did your rage explode last midnight? Did you see red, *rococo?*"

Fanette nods urgently. "Oui. Each morn on her waking."

"Did you wrestle her down, pull pillow free, press it on her face?"

"Some morn two cup."

"Then slip it back under her head so would seem she'd passed away in her sleep?"

Fanette's gaze has slid again to his shoes. Hand flies to her mouth but shreds of a giggle slip between spread fingers.

Crossing right foot over left, the deputy writes in his green book. The maid, tight-lipped, keeps left hand up and ready for next breakup thirty seconds later that gets mostly stuffed.

Foxx keeps on writing and doesn't look at her. She looks at Miller who nods towards door. Whirling, she speeds from the room, hair streaming somewhat ethereally.

Another minute passes. The deputy's support knee buckles and he goes down in a heap on the stained rug. A quick hip-roll gets him

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sitting with pad on left knee, writing rapidly, turning a page every twenty seconds or so.

After seven pages, Miller, who has sat by the feet of the red-haired lady, says with some force, "I've been patient."

Not denying it, Foxx goes on writing.

"A little past eight I phoned that this lady, my great-aunt, had died in her sleep. She was eighty-eight. You arrived with two policemen and the morgue men came, and my doctor whom I'd called, who pronounced death as due to debilities of age. Then everyone left except the morgue men and you. You said you wanted to check something and went under the bed. I took the men to the kitchen for coffee. I came back and you held up a pair of slippers and asked whose."

Foxx turns a page.

"They were Miss Boylan's. You went back under and came out with a dime and asked if it were hers. I said I supposed so. You said you'd take it to the lab for tests and have it now in a plastic envelope in your pocket."

Foxx writes.

"You walked around picking up things and asking whose. All were my great-aunt's. Then you went out the window and dug up the lawn. Then you fell back in and fixed the wall and the rug. Then you questioned and accused my two servants separately, of sexual mania and murder, Hing by poison and Fanette by pillow. I had told you and the policemen that neither either speaks or understands English."

Foxx has stopped writing and slid ballpoint into breast pocket, and is now flipping pages, scanning what he's written.

Miller concludes, "I gave her a nice home for twelve years. She had a long, peaceful old age, and a painless windup. Now it's time she got where she's going."

The deputy lithely rises, pronouncing, "The tale's nearly told. It needs now to be shaped, and an apt ending."

Stepping to the window he gazes out and murmurs, "Myriad footprints in the green alas."

"Yes. None imaginary."

Foxx shakes head. "Shows how I get lost in a story." Holding up and waggling notebook.

"Story?"

"Send bill to sheriff's department for necessary repairs and cleanup, I'll authorize . . . Yes, story. Hobby of mine. Lots of dead

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time in police work." Stroking lips he looks thoughtful. "Might make a title."

"What might?"

" 'Lots of Dead Time in Police Work.' " Opening notebook he gets out ballpoint and jots.

"You're writing a story and that's the title?"

Foxx looks sullen. "No." Lining through the last entry he closes book and returns it and ballpoint to pockets.

Miller asks, "What was all that with Hing and Fanette?"

"Studied silliness. They'll be characters in a semi-existential story developing from routine police call."

"Existential . . . that's a philosophy, isn't it?" But Foxx has moved to the door and is calling with force, "You guys soaked up enough coffee yet?"

Whether or not, they come quickly with gurney and putting the reposeful red-tufted lady on it, cover and wheel her out the bedroom and down the hall.

Miller asks again about existential. Foxx says, "Lots of definitions. I like one that says nothing exists before or beyond the moment of now. Past is dead and future's unborn."

Miller doesn't say anything.

Foxx walks to the window, swivels, and is perched on sill as before. Miller asks, "You like to go out that way?"

"Ties in with opening scene." The deputy smoothly swings legs around and out, but bent too far forward goes straight down, palms and knees making four new creases.

Miller asks if he falls on purpose. Foxx is up, knocking muddy grass from knees with sides of palms. "Not exactly—I provide room for things to happen, and if so I write about them." He has in his hand a small plastic envelope which shows a dime in it. He holds it up to Miller who shrugs, takes it.

Foxx says, "Nice to meet you," turns. Miller says, "Thanks for everything." Foxx's wave signifies not worth a mention, and he strides left and around rear corner of house to gate that lets to front.

Miller regards the several new dents. He feels like a character in a developing semi-existential story, which it seems he is, as are Chun Hing, Fanette, the late Vestra Boylan, the two morgue men, and the tall deputy who's developing it.

Suddenly a story he's not thought of in years jumps into his head, which he gets a sudden urge to share with the deputy. His vague and unformed reason is that hearing it might help Foxx round out

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his story which when so, Miller can stop being a developing character in it and get back to normal.

He hurries to front door and out. The cream-colored hearse is gone. Foxx is maneuvering his old wagon to aim it out the driveway.

Miller comes around front as Foxx shifts to idle and puts his window down. Miller says, "A Hemingway story has an old man drinking by himself in a clean, well-lighted place." Foxx nods. "Then two waiters close up the place and the old man goes. The waiters talk about loneliness and life. At the end, one says to himself that everything is *nada,* adds up to nothing—is that the point of your story?"

The deputy smiles. "It would be, except it can't have a point, as that's the point, as there's no point to anything including it."

"No point in writing it?"

"Completely none."

Miller can't think of anything more to contribute. He nods and steps clear. Foxx nods and puts car in drive.

To his ear comes a lilty giggle. In mirror he sees in open doorway Fanette in her robe of myriad colors, teeth a shining curve. In the light morning breeze her fine hair wafts somewhat bouncily.

Which he decides will be closing scene of the story as it offers no meaning or future or point, thus makes an apt finish and gives him his title too.

Sun has broken up the grey, and the day will be bright and fine. Foxx drives back to Ventura feeling in tune with himself and each moment which exists for just that long, then becomes nothing.

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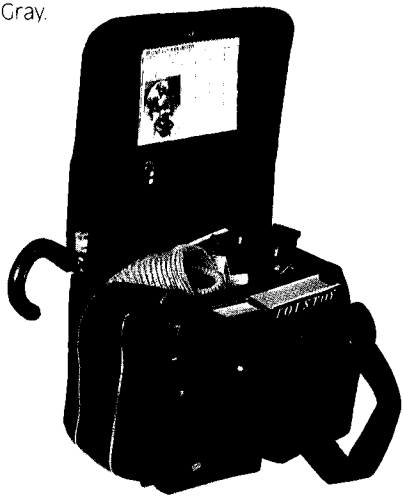

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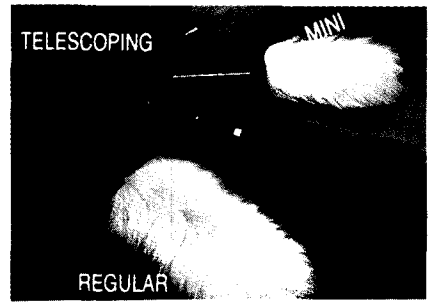

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